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Venture

SCIENCE FICTION

HIJACK

complete new novel by

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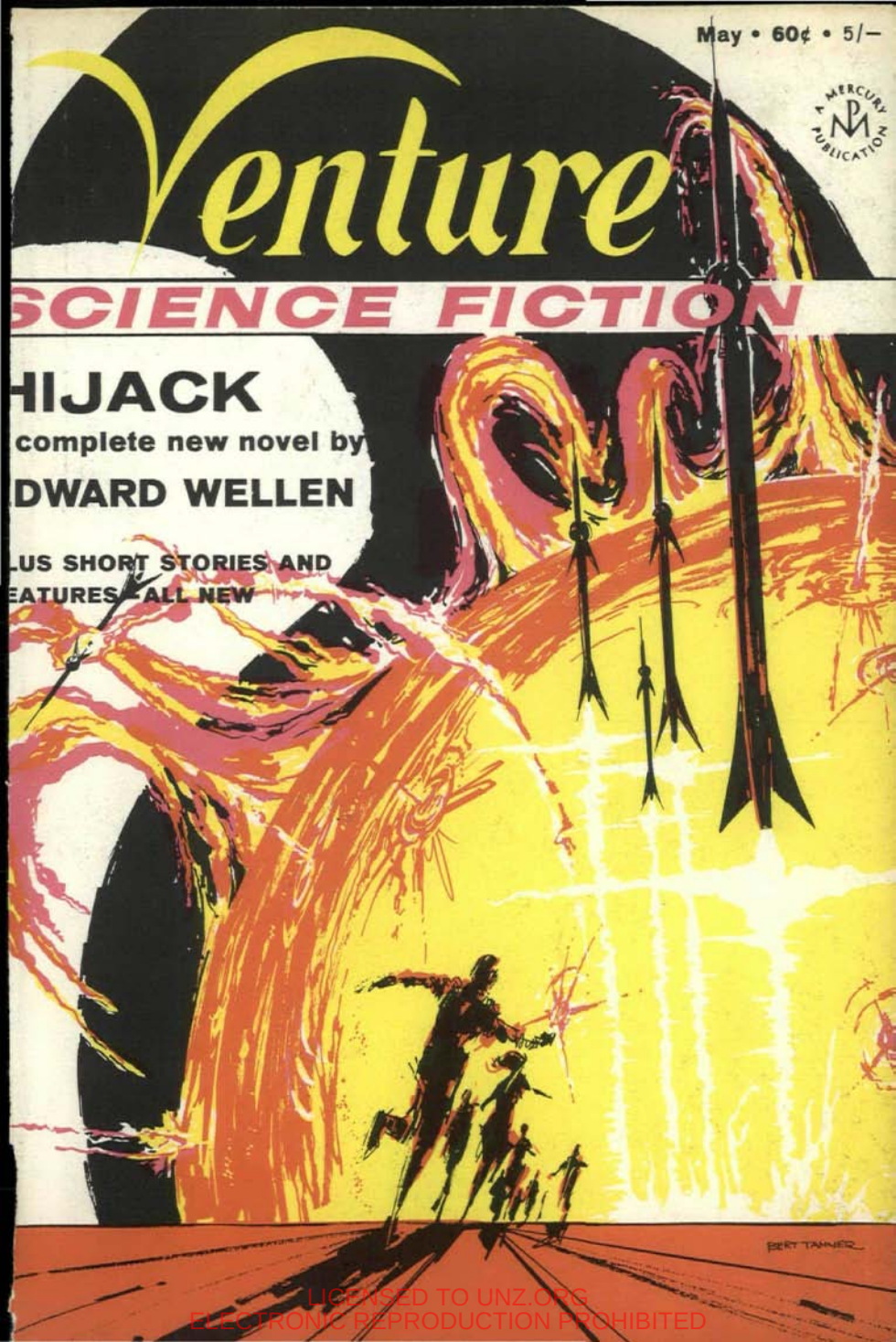

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SCIENCE FICTION

NEW NOVEL, COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

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Edward Wellen's feature novel for Venture is almost certainly the first science fiction Mafia novel ever published. It is the story of an incredible operation that is carried out with military-like precision in the face of impending holocaust. It has fascinating and credible characters, a wildly inventive story line and unbearable suspense. And if you think that this blurb perhaps overstates things, come back and have another look after you've finished HIJACK!

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FOUNDED IN 1957. PUBLISHED BY MERCURY PRESS, INC., PUBLISHERS OF THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION.

Venture Science Fiction Magazine, Vol. 4, No. 2, Whole No. 15, MAY 1970. Published bi-monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at 60¢ a copy. 12 issue subscription $7.00. Publication office 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03301. Editorial and general mail should be sent to 347 East 53 St., New York, N. Y. 10022. Application to mail at second class postage rates is pending. Printed in U. S. A.

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Submissions must be accompanied by return postage; the publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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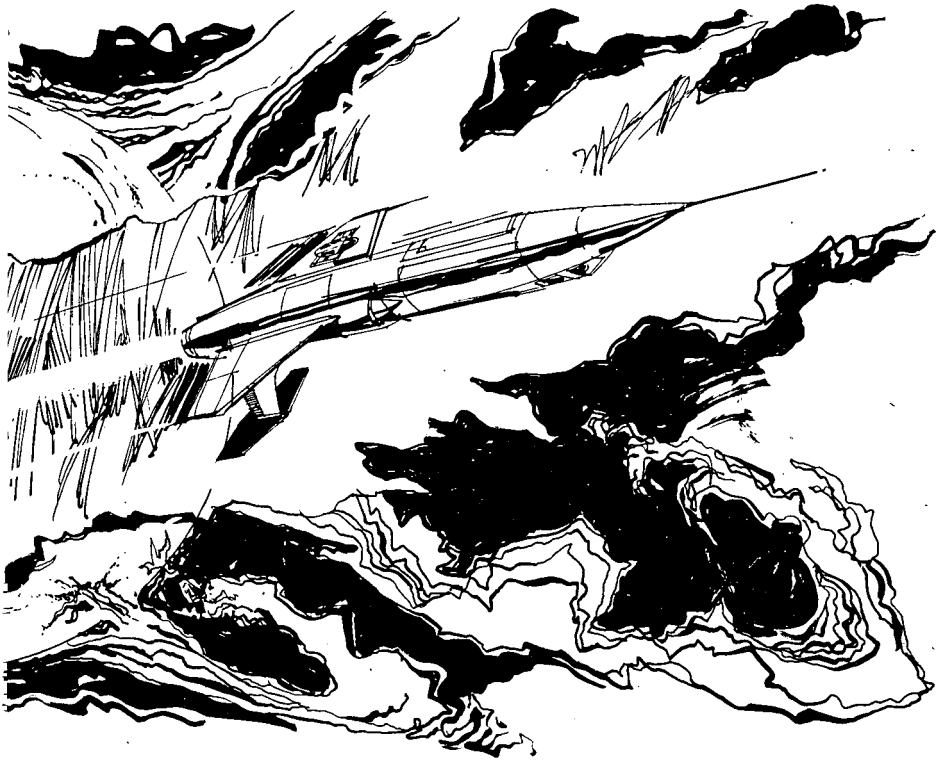

Hijack

by Edward Wellen

H-DAY MINUS 30

NICK Tallant lay watching the glowing dial of his travel clock. Magnolia Motel. He had yet to smell magnolias. Or maybe he smelled them without knowing they were what he smelled. He heard it start to rain. Great.

He tongued the new cap on his molar. Testing, one-two-three-four. The gum around it still felt sore. A radio transceiver in his tooth, for God's sake. The things he did for the Family. Lucky it didn't need an antenna lifting out of the top of his head.

He heard Ferro get up in the next unit and saw it was time. He didn't move. Let Ferro earn his bread.

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A knock, soft for a heavy hand.

"Come in."

The door opened. The lights in the court silver-plated the fine rain. Ferro slipped in. Not only the dimness hid much of Ferro's smile. His nose took up much more of his face than it had been born to cover.

"Time, Nick."

Nick sat up and swung his stockinged feet to the rug. He put on his shoes, buckled them, stood up. He tied a neat bow tie, put on his jacket, ran his comb through his hair. He took his time, trying to show Ferro he wasn't burning to know what was up. Ferro must be wondering even more but hid it behind that nose. Why didn't Ferro get a plastic job? Maybe he liked looking tough.

"How about bringing the car to the door? No sense both of us getting wet."

Ferro looked at him.

"Yeah."

But Ferro brightened as always at the chance to get behind the wheel of a car. This car was the Ford Galaxy outside the motel manager's unit. It waited for them, gassed, oiled, greased, and, to make it rain, washed. Ferro turned to the door.

A car started up. Ferro and Nick looked at each other, guessing where the sound came from, and rushed out. The Galaxy was pulling away.

"Hey!"

A boy at the wheel, a girl beside him—at least Nick thought it was a girl. The car picked up speed. In a second it would be out on the highway.

Nick had never seen anyone look as indignant as Ferro looked right then. Ferro's hand shot toward his shoulder holster. Nick made a move to grip Ferro's arm, then remembered the Law of the Hand. Not that this would really be a breach of it, but he used his voice instead.

"No."

The sharpness worked. Ferro grimaced, but slowly pulled his gun hand back empty. The car flashed away toward Atlanta.

Nick and Ferro got back under the overhang. Ferro looked at Nick.

"What the hell now? Call a taxi?"

"You know we can't use a cab. Not with big ears in the front. Anyway, by the time we got one here in the rain . . ."

Ferro scanned the court. His eyes lighted on a white Mustang three units down.

"How about that one? Want I should jump the ignition?"

Nick wavered. Nothing excused getting stuck in the middle of nowhere when Don Vincenzo Podesta waited. He was about to nod when he saw through the entrance gap the headlights of a truck coming down the highway. A private garbage truck. He gestured Ferro toward the entrance.

"Flag it down."

Ferro shook his head but ran. Nick took off his jacket to cover his head, then followed. By the time he

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came up with Ferro the truck had stopped in a near-skid a few feet from Ferro, and the white driver and the two black loaders were getting out of the cab. Before any of them could say anything Nick had his wallet out and flashed green.

"We need to borrow your truck for an hour. We'll bring it back here the same shape it's in. Why don't you guys all just report a breakdown?"

The driver said nothing with his slack mouth. Ferro swelled his chest so the shoulder holster would bulge. The driver looked at Nick, at Ferro, at the truck, at the two loaders.

"Well . . ."

Nick handed each a fifty-dollar bill. The driver frowned at the fifties in the black hands. Nick handed him another fifty. The driver nodded. Ferro had already climbed into the cab and was finding out how much play there was in the wheel.

One of the black men wore withered blossoms in his cap. He caught Nick eyeing them. He grinned.

"Magnolias."

Nick smelled nothing. He lowered his jacket, shook it, folded it. He climbed into the cab, spread his handkerchief on the seat, and sat with his jacket in his lap. He nodded to Ferro and slammed the door.

Ferro was rusty at double-clutching and got the truck rolling with a jerk that made him redden. The truck rumbled like a whale's belly, then ran smoothly. Nick glanced in the rear-view mirror on his door. The driver and loaders got wetter and smaller.

Nick tried to sit easy without letting his silken back touch the worn upholstery. Ferro made good time but looked still red from the lousy start.

"Jeez, Nick, you got style."

"Let me return the compliment, Ferro. I feel fine, I feel real secure with you riding shotgun."

"What shotgun? I always pack a Police Special."

Nick reached across himself to touch Ferro. Ferro glanced at Nick.

"What's that for?"

"You said the word police. I touched you against the evil eye."

Ferro's lumpy jaw grew lumpier.

"I bet you don't believe none of that, the evil eye and all. I bet you just said that for the laugh. I bet you think I'm so dumb I don't even know my name means iron, why you touched me against the evil eye."

"I don't think you're dumb."

"Sure."

In his mind Nick swung his right forearm up and sliced his left hand into the hinge. Up yours, Ferro. Ferro would never be anything more than a button man. While Nick . . .

Ferro must have reminded himself of the same.

"Not that a shotgun don't have its points. Pumpkin-ball shotgun shells rip a man to pieces worse than a forty-five."

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"That's a good thing to know, Jimmy."

Ferro cut a glance at Nick and saw Nick really meant it. Ferro smiled.

"Sure. I can give you lots of pointers."

The truck slewed some on a slick curve. Ferro scowled.

"Them goddamn juvenile delinquents. Swiping that Galaxy for a joy ride."

"That reminds me, Ferro. Stop for a second at the first outdooor phone booth."

Vandals had been at the first phone booth. The one after that proved sound. Nick phoned the motel manager and told him to report the car missing from its parking space.

The manager snapped out of cranky sleepiness.

"I thought I heard the car tear away. But I figured it was you. Sure, Mr. Tallant, I'll call the cops right away, tell them I just now looked out and saw it gone." He hawked. "There's nothing else I should know?"

Nick hung up.

All the man had to know was what Nick had told him. Now if the cops nailed the car for speeding and called the registered owner, the man wouldn't blurt Nick's name. "But I loaned it to Mr. Tallant—"

Ferro made up the time. The garbage truck held north toward the glass and steel towers of Atlanta's Five Points, though aiming short of that promised land. The scatter of lighted windows made the buildings a giant stand of negative punch cards. Ferro slowed the truck suddenly but carefully.

And as they rounded the curve, Nick saw the red pulse of a police car. A cop came toward them swinging a flashlight. In the other hand he carried a flare.

"Easy, Ferro."

But Ferro had already seen the wreck beyond the police car and put his gun hand back on the wheel. Nick drew his face back into shadow. Ferro leaned out his window as the cop drew near.

"A bad one?"

"A bad one. You can go on but take it slow going by."

Ferro nodded and took it slow going by. Looking back, Nick saw the cop plant the flare just around the curve and light it. Looking past Ferro, he saw the Galaxy had skidded across the dividing line and slammed into a concrete post on the left shoulder of the road. The kids were part of the car.

My father the car. In a flash the whole thing of his father passed through Nick's mind. Not that Nick had known at the time what had happened, he being too young then. But he had pieced it together when he came to know the way of his father's world. The ride. The body in the trunk. The crusher.

Suddenly, as if some catch had let go, the arm of the Galaxy's windshield wiper made one drunken

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sweep over a jag of glass. Then the truck swung past the other cop and the other flare. It picked up speed again, soon made a right turn.

Ferro raised a finger from the wheel.

"See, there's always a coat of oil and gas and rubber on the road. Dumb kid didn't know rain floats it up and makes a slick. It washes away after a half hour, but until then . . ."

"Yeah."

What was his father like? He couldn't remember anything but a blur of bigness and strength and the smell of cigar smoke. There was no family album to show how he looked at the stages of his life. No Family album. And no police file; that was missing. The Family had fixed that. Newspaper morgues would show only bent head, or hat or cuffed hands in front of face. There was only Nick to show that his father had had being. Wasn't his mother roughly fond of hand-brushing the hair from his eyes and saying that sometimes Nick looked just like his father?

Ferro was pointing across Nick's eyes.

"That's it there." He caught Nick's glance. "No, I never been in there. But I know."

Stone walls did not a prison make nor iron bars a cage, but they sure helped. The granite walling in the vast acreage behind the main building looked to run between thirty and forty feet high. Atlanta Federal Penitentiary must seem a strong illusion to Don Vince Podesta and some three thousand other inmates.

"Come on, you stupid bastard!"

Nick's head nearly hit the cab roof. The voice rang loud and clear in his skull, but Ferro hadn't heard. The cant of Ferro's head showed him wondering why the jump and the burning face. Nick tapped his ear and nodded toward the pen. Ferro nodded back and put the truck in low, slowly following the contour of the pen. Nick drew a breath.

"I'm here, Don Vince."

"What? What? Speak up."

"I'm here, Don Vince."

"You ain't Tony."

"No. I'm Tony's nephew. Nick Tallant."

"Oh, yeah, the nephew. Taglione. The son of Mike Taglione."

Did he imagine a shade of laughter in Don Vince's voice?

"Yes, sir."

"Hey, it just hit me. I bet you thought I was talking to you at first."

Laughter exploded in Nick's skull. It did no good to hold his hands over his ears. Then Vince's voice came soft in his head again.

"I was talking back to the TV. I been giving them the idea I talk back to the TV. So now when I talk to you if they look in they think I'm talking to the TV. I was just now hollering to Randolph Scott why he didn't see the guy in the black hat behind the rock. It's a Randolph Scott festival on the late late show all this week."

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Nick leaned back. Don Vince's voice snapped him forward again.

"Listen, Taglione, what's the matter Tony didn't show? Too proud he got all his teeth? Don't wanna grind away the enamel just to talk to me?"

"Not that, Don Vincenzo."

Maybe it was that. Hard to smile when the joke was on you, but good old cunning Tony Chestnut must've winced and looked for an out when Don Vince's code word for this kind of secret meeting reached him. To cap the jest, it had been Nick himself who had made it feasible.

The Family's vending machine corporation had taken over an electronics firm and planned to milk it to death. But Nick showed Tony and Tony showed Vince the greater profit in keeping it alive and well, in keeping up with the state-of-the-art spin-offs of space research. And a few months back the payoff came when Don Vince, before surrendering himself for imprisonment, let a Family dentist ruin one of his good molars, cement in a silicon-chip transceiver, and crown it. Bone conducted the radio signals to the brain. Muscle-flexing, the mere working of the jaws, powered it.

"Not that? Then what is it?"

"He got the word you wanted him to end the dock strike, and he got the code word you wanted to speak this way. He sent me here because some of the longshoremen didn't like the idea, and he had to go to Brooklyn and show his face."

"Yeah?" Don Vince let some silence sink in. "Well, here's what you tell him for me. He knows we started the wildcat strike so I could make a deal with the Feds to cut my sentence or at least agree I'm a sick man and send me some place nicer. It worked better than I thought. They call me to the warden's office, and what do you know it's the Attorney General himself there. We're alone and I put it to him first. I say to him, 'Mr. Attorney General, you know you sent me up on a bum rap. Narcotics conspiracy? That meet was to get my people *out* of the junk traffic and let the Cubans have it all. Then you would turn the heat off us and on them.'

"His hands plead innocence but I see he's in a cold sweat. These bastards. They muscled in on the Indians, they took over the territory, they think it all belongs to them, and we're going to be a bunch of organ grinders and knife sharpeners. Well, we got a few stings for the Wasps. After all, who found this place? Randolph Scott? Cristoforo Colombo from Genoa, that's who found this place."

Ferro cut a glance at Nick. Nick made a sign it was all right, Don Vince was coming through. Don Vince went on coming through.

"Well, anyways, we come to an understanding about the strike. I tell him he should quit rough-shadowing the capos. I say to him, 'It ain't nice to shame them in front of their neighbors. Besides, they can't move

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around and get in touch with who they got to get in touch with to fix what you want them to fix if you guys are dogging them.' And he says he'll lay off. And in return for my patriotic cooperation they're sending me to a nice hospital in a month or two.

"But here's why I wanted to speak to Tony. I get the feeling something big's up. I listen to my feelings. Tell Tony to find out what it is. We can put more arm on them to get me out quicker if we know where they're hurting, or at least cut ourselves in. So what we do now, we bust the strike. We even stop all pilfering on the piers. We keep things moving so we can follow them and see where they wind up, what it all adds up to. Got that?"

"I got that but the signal's fading. We'll drive around once more, Don Vince."

"No, the picture's over and the station's going off the air. I don't want them to think I talk to myself, or they'll send me to another kind of hospital. You just tell Tony what I . . ."

"Yes, Don Vince." Loud.

Nick didn't know if Don Vince heard him but it was Ferro's turn to jump. He nodded to Ferro that Don Vince was over and out. If Ferro noted the sweat sticking Nick's shirt to his armpits, back, and chest, he said nothing. He put the truck smoothly into high.

The rain had stopped. They ditched the truck under the Viaduct, just parked it at the curb and walked to an all-night luncheonette.

"The carting outfit has got to belong to a Family," Nick said. "Teach the hired help not to hand over company property to strangers."

"That's right, Nick."

Nick put on his jacket and smoothed the sleeves as Ferro held the luncheonette door for him and they went into the steamy place. A man came from the back with a late smile. They ordered and ate. Nick wondered if Don Vince could hear him bite the toast. He smiled and crunched hard. He felt Ferro's glance and dipped the rest in his sunnyside-up egg.

There was a cab rank around the corner and they taxied back to the Magnolia Motel. The taxi took another road south out of Atlanta, cut across below the motel, and came up the highway to turn into the motel.

Cater-corners from the motel entrance the garbage men leaned under two dripping trees, facing north. The man with the magnolia blossoms in his cap was the only one who might have seen them come in, having the tail of his eye toward the taxi. But he either dozed or didn't want to see them.

The blind at the motel manager's unit stirred as Nick paid off the driver. The taxi drove off.

Ferro nodded and went into his unit. Nick stood by his own door. He took a deep breath. Magnolias? He went in.

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He stripped for a shower. More than to wash away the garbage stink, he showered to wash away the stickiness from gabbing with Vince. He had a few hours till he had to catch the plane back to New York and Tony Chestnut. Ferro would see he caught it. This time he would sit apart from Ferro and maybe make time with a hostess. He lay down as day broke out of prison-grayness. The court lights were still on, with diminishing returns. The luminous face of the travel clock burned palely, shadowing forth 5:45. Took matt-black to make some lights bright. The minute hand moved. He fell asleep thinking of the drunken sweep of a windshield wiper.

Tony Chestnut spotted the cop before the cop spotted him. The cop was a plain-clothes dick on airport detail, name of Rocco Urbano. A real hard-nose who liked to show what a good American he was by being rough on The Boys. Too late to turn and go and save face. By now Urbano had spotted him and was waiting to see whom he was here to meet off the flight from Boston, which meant Urbano would embarrass Tony in front of Rose.

But no punk of a cop was going to make Tony Chestnut turn and run. Besides, Urbano's face would fall when he saw Tony meet only his wife.

Tony felt his own face burn under the expensive tan. Urbano would split a gut laughing if he learned why Rose went up to Boston in the first place. Their son getting in with a bad crowd, the Students for a Democratic Society, and landing in jail. Goddamnit, if Rose's talk with Sonny didn't do any good, he would have to deal with Sonny himself. Here came Rose.

He read Rose's face. She had on too much smile. That meant she got nowhere with Sonny. That meant he would have to deal with Sonny, teach him that like all kin of Mafiosi he should keep a low silhouette.

Rose knew he knew and looked surprised when he grabbed her to kiss her. But then she understoood when he said in her ear, "The fuzz."

She switched her overnight case to walk on Tony's left. They made for the exit. They were almost there and Tony thought maybe Urbano wasn't going to brace him after all. But there he was, blocking the way.

"Okay, Tony, lean over and put your hands on the wall."

"The Supreme Court says—"

"I know what the Supreme Court says. I can always say I thought that cigarette case in your pocket was a gun."

"You're just doing this to embarrass me."

"That's right."

"Mind showing your tin?"

"You know who I am."

"Sure, but how do I know you're still on the force? Cops get the boot all the time."

Urbano flashed his badge.

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"Satisfied?"

"You know when I'll be satisfied."

Tony turned to the wall and made himself a hypotenuse. Urbano followed the book frisking Tony. Don't pat. Run the hand. Patting misses telltale bulges. Left foot in front of friskee's left foot when searching left side and right foot in front of friskee's right foot when searching right side, ready to trip. Gun in left hand at level of and close to left hip when searching left side, switching gun to right hand when searching right side.

"What's the matter, paisan'?"

"Don't call me paisan'."

"You Jewish? You don't look Jewish."

"The trouble is you don't either."

"You sound like you prejudiced."

"Face to the wall, Tony."

A flash bulb popped. Tony stiffened, but didn't push from the wall. Some goddamn lens-hound hanging around to catch celebrities had caught him.

"Don't you know nothing, Detective Urbano? English tailors don't put in hip pockets. Some time that might be a clue. Like who sat on the grass in a park on Staten Island."

Urbano's hand finished and fell away.

"Okay, Tony."

Tony straightened. He looked at Urbano's loud sports shirt and baggy slacks.

"Give me your measurements and I'll send them to my tailor."

"Sure you don't mean undertaker?"

"Whyn't you go climb back on a peach?"

Tony cursed himself for wasting time bad-mouthing Urbano when the terminal clock was telling him to get to a phone for the cheesebox call from Nick about the talk with Vince. But Urbano had had his fun. He turned to Rose and tipped the pork-pie hat that hid his bald spot. She looked away. Urbano left them. Tony grabbed Rose's elbow and steered her to the phones.

His luck was coming back. He hit a phone that worked first try. Rose drew breath and put a hand on his arm.

"Tony, you going to talk to Nick?"

He looked at her hard, then nodded.

"Please tell him hello from his Aunt Rose and say not to forget he has a date with Clara Dellaripa tomorrow night."

"Instead of matchmaking, better you worry about your own son making a bad name for us."

He broke into the line hum with spins of the dial. Rose planted herself in front of him so no one could see to read his lips. It was 10:32.

At 10:32 Nick Tallant stepped into a phone booth in Manhattan and dialed another number.

Whitewash on the plate glass windows of an empty store in the Bronx strained milk of sunlight.

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Some spilled on two phones. An electrical circuit—the cheesebox—connected them. Too, the cheesebox tied into burglar alarms on doors, windows, and skylights and would cut the connection if anyone tried to break into the store.

"Hello?"

"Hello, goombah."

"What he have to say?"

"He says Mr. G is working on something big. He says make no waves till we find out what it is."

"So long."

"So long."

Click.

Click.

The automatic timer on the cheesebox suffered frustration. It was all set to cut them off after three minutes. Its job was to frustrate a snooper. Even with forewarning of a call, a snooper needed seven minutes to trace the call.

That goddamn Urbano. But when Tony, riding in the back of a new Cadillac with Rose, saw his home swing into sight as the car turned into the drive, he felt high. Urbano would never own a home in Bronxville. Urbano wasn't Jewish or Black, but he didn't have the scratch. Tony looked around with a fat smile.

But that goddamn Urbano again. The shot of him frisking Tony Chestnut made the evening edition. Tony scowled at the caption. He phoned his lawyer.

"You seen my pitcher in the paper?"

Professional caution.

"I believe I noticed what you refer to."

"Where do they get off printing I got a crooked smile? You know I ain't never been convicted of nothing. Can't I sue them for libel?"

H-DAY MINUS 29

THE POLICE COMMISSIONER himself pulled the carpet out from under Detective Rocco Urbano.

"At ease, at ease. It seems Tony Chestnut is passing word on from Vince Podesta for dock wallopers to go back to work and, would you believe it, to stop pilfering. I got my own word from high up, little lower than the angels, to lay off the Mob. I don't know, they tell me it has to do with national security. We can't be harassing such good citizens, can we now. I'm taking you off airport detail and posting you out on Staten Island."

Urbano slowly reached for his shield.

The commissioner sighed.

"Hold it, Urbano. Don't be a big fool."

Urbano's hand stopped, dropped empty.

"All right, sir, I'll be a bigger fool."

Down in the hold of the *Queen B.*, alongside the Red Hook pier, Knocko Kelly was bitching again.

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"You can't even knock up a dame these days. The damn pill. Even the good Catholic girls pop them on the sly. How's a man to know he's a man?"

"Sure, Knocko, sure."

The others found level places, stretching themselves and the work out. Knocko moved restlessly around. This was one of the increasingly rare ones. Not much fun any more, what with containerization. He found himself out of sight of the others.

They had all got the word, but could he help it if a crate happened to open enough to show what it held? What the crate held would hardly have a bearing on national security. He pawed through the stuff. Just her size and just the thing to get him in good with his girl again.

He looked around, grabbbed a handful, and puled off his pants. When he came out he had got his pants back on, but the clench of his zipper showed the strain.

The others kept from looking at him. Knocko tried to fill the silence but saw it was no use. They put their minds and backs into unloading. The pier boss stared, then laughed as they came up on deck.

"You guys wanna give me a heart attack finishing so fast? How come?"

No one answered. But they eyed the hold. Knocko's awkward walk had put him last on the hook. He rode up to find everyone looking at him.

The pier boss looked hard. He nodded to the pier winchman.

The hook swung the wrong way, jerked, and slipped. Knocko squeezed the blood out of his hands on the cable, but his head struck the pier, and he was out when he hit the water. A great, sopping weight dragged him down.

He surfaced on a hospital bed in a sea of grinning faces, and the nurses and nuns were peeling French lace panties off him one by damn one.

With searing awareness he knew he had lost the name Knocko forever. From here on out it would be something like Lace Panties Irish Kelly. He turned his face to the wall.

Sunlight slowly churned the empty store's volume of air. Tiny thunders curdled the milky dust near the two phones.

"Hello, zio?"

"Hello, nipote. What you got?"

"It all funnels down to Cape Kennedy."

"I get the same. But what does it mean?"

"They've been sending stuff into orbit for a space platform. But this begins to look like something more."

"Yeah? Yeah. Well, stay with it. So long."

Click.

"Goombye, goombah."

Click.

Frustration.

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Nick Tallant didn't like the look of the chauffeur double-parked on Park. The cop on the corner didn't like the guy's look so much that he kept his back to the car. Nick glanced past the guy to look down Park at the big clock on Grand Central. The chauffeur eyed Nick as if wondering why Nick hung around or as if he knew why and had his doubts. The girls were coming out of Miss Knox's School of Skills, so it was a cinch he knew why.

A man passing seemed familiar. Of course. Buglewicz. Dr. Norman Buglewicz. Nick brightened. He was just going to call Buglewicz's name when he heard his own.

Clara. She danced to meet Nick.

"Hello, Clara. Here, let me carry your books."

School days, school days, damnit. But at least she had dressed up for the date and had made up to look older than eighteen. She whirled the books away from him.

"No thanks, Nick."

"Well, all right. Wait there, I'll get a cab."

"Never mind, Nick."

The double-parked limousine slid forward so the chauffeur had room to swing open the rear door. Nick laughed.

"I should've known."

He helped Clara in. She dumped her books on the floor.

"Where to, Miss Dellaripa?"

"Where to, Nick?"

"A nice quiet little place for a nice quiet little girl."

Clara made a face.

"Not too quiet a place. I've been saving up. My stomach's rumbling."

Nick met the raised eyebrow in the mirror and called it.

"East Thirty-sixth. I don't remember the number but I'll say when."

"Yes, Mr. Tallant."

Yes, Mr. Tallant. He was famous. He smiled at Clara. Her answering smile took a moment to break, but when it did, it seemed all the brighter. She had been looking at him gravely. He settled back. He didn't know Clara well, had met her, now he came to think of it, only a few times over the years, but he felt comfortable with her.

Looking at her, he knew that with her, as with him, it hadn't been traumatic learning their families were Families. They had grown into knowing.

The limousine passed the man walking. Buglewicz, all right. Beginning to get gray.

School days, school days. Nick had still been in high school when once in a while he got a tip to get a bet down on a certain horse in a certain race and the horse always came in first, even if the other horses had to walk. And he was in college when once in a while he got a warning not to go to a certain spot at a certain time because it wouldn't be safe, and it always turned out unsafe for someone.

And then one day he found himself asking as if he had the right

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now to know, "Tell me, Uncle Tony, how did my father die?"

"Look, Nick. Your father had a few nice things going, from a loansharking franchise to points in a Caribbean gambling joint. Some people wanted what he had. So they started spreading a lot of crap about your father. They said he was getting soft in the head from the syph. They said he was liable to spill his guts. I didn't for a minute fall for it. I don't think nobody really did. But once the word gets around like that, the guy is through. So the Commission met and voted to make the hit. But them people never got what they wanted. I seen to that. A little gunplay made them see they better lay off, and in the end I picked up the pieces. And I don't know how good I done, but I looked out for your mother, and I tried to take your father's place with you."

Nick put his hand on Tony's shoulder and squeezed. Then a thought took hold of him. Tony knew where the devil kept his tail. He would know the answer to this.

"Who killed my father?"

"You don't want to know that."

"I want to know."

"I'm telling you you don't."

"He was my father. And your sister's husband.'"

A long pause. Then Tony shrugged.

"On your head, then. It was the Corvinos. Renzo and Nunzio Corvino." He smiled. "They was the ones wanted what your father had and they was the ones got the contract. But they didn't get nothing else."

Renzo and Nunzio Corvino. Nick burned the names into his brain. Renzo and Nunzio Corvino. He had heard of them. They were into West Coast gambling and smuggling. Renzo and Nunzio Corvino. He would remember.

That was his true rite of passage, not the initiation ceremony that came after he got out of college.

"Now who's the quiet one?"

"Sorry, Clara. I forgot to push the button for small talk." Nick tilted his head to read the lettering on the spines. "Spanish and Portuguese and international commerce. Good." That fitted in with what he knew. The Family was planning to filter its business into Latin America. "How are they coming along?"

She so-so'd with her hand, then looked at him gravely again.

"You're twenty-seven."

"Guilty."

"And I'm eighteen. But I'm not a schoolgirl schoolgirl."

"I know, I hated that kind of question too." He leaned forward. "It's in the middle of the next block." He sat back. "We'll start fresh when we get inside."

The headwaiter bowed them to a cozy table at a banquette corner. But Nick started anything but fresh. You didn't use the same small talk on the granddaughter of Don Vincenzo Podesta that you did on an airline hostess.

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Halfway through the meal he stopped his fork halfway to his mouth.

Clara slowly turned to look, seeming to stiffen herself against stiffening. She smiled when she saw it was a man.

"The way your eyes lit up."

Nick laughed.

"For the longest time you don't see someone you know. Then all at once you run into him time and again. I'm having a run of Buglewicz."

"Buglewicz?"

"That man, oblivious to everything but his veal parmigiano, is Dr. Norman Buglewicz. No? Doesn't mean anything to you, but he's famous in the think-tank world. I had him for a series of lectures at Harvard."

"Oh? On what?"

"Buglewicz on systems-analysis management techniques. Use of computers to simulate and predict situations."

"My. Want to go over and say hello?"

"He probably wouldn't remember me. And I don't want to come between a man and his digestion."

But for the rest of the evening he kept coming back to Buglewicz in his mind. He couldn't take the granddaughter of Don Vincenzo Podesta to "Hair" or any other of the four-letter shows. Buglewicz helped block out the kind of show he did take her to.

Clara seemed to enjoy it, though. In the limousine taking them to her home in East Orange, New Jersey, he listened to her tell him what they had seen. He saw her to her door. The chauffeur drove him to the station to catch the train back to Manhattan. Clara's hand had been warm and firm. And she had kissed him on the cheek.

H-DAY MINUS 28

TWO BLACK PHONES IN A SPILL of smogrified sunlight.

"Hello?"

"Hello."

"Getting nowhere, huh?"

"Nowhere. Like to try something."

"What?"

"Ever hear of Buglewicz?"

"What is it?"

"It's a guy. B-u-g-l-e-w-i-c-z. He runs a think tank. That's an outfit that works mainly for the Pentagon. He gets contracts—assignments—to say what would happen if the Russians thought we thought they thought we thought they thought our ABM was better than their ABM. I had this guy at college and he's good. I remember him figuring a way to end the population explosion."

"Hell, I could tell you a way to end the fucking population explosion. Look, he sounds like a real gem: if you say he's good, he's good. All I care is, can he do the job?"

"If anyone can he can."

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"Then get him."

"Fine, goom—"

Click.

Satisfaction.

Nick Tallant used the Gotham Towers house phone. Buglewicz had trouble getting the name right and trouble placing the person.

"Tallant. Oh, yes." Pause. "I suppose I can see you. Come on up, as long as you're here."

But when they shook hands, he nodded.

"Oh, yes. Tallant. So you're one of the shell-like ears I muttered pearls of wisdom into. Did it do any good? Did it take? Have you been humping the bitch-goddess Dogma?"

Before Nick could answer, Buglewicz looked at him with sudden sharpness.

"How in the world did you know I was in town and where to find me?"

"I happened to catch sight of you around town, and my secretary phoned hotels till she hit."

"Your secretary?" Buglewicz took Nick in, pursed his lips, and nodded. He gestured Nick to a chair.

He pulled scraps of paper from flesh-tightened pockets and tried to make out his handwriting.

He glanced up at Nick's silence then returned to shuffling the papers.

"Errands. I'm only in town to wind up some business and buy a few things before joining my family in the Poconos for a well-earned holiday. Don't mind me, uh, Tallant, go on with what you want to say."

"Can you use ten thousand dollars cash for a few days' work? More if it takes longer."

Dr. Buglewicz stuffed the scraps of paper back in his pockets.

"Pearls upon the waters?" He sat down facing Nick. "Who wants to know what?"

"I'm with Delphic Enterprises." Pause. "It's a holding company, a conglomerate. Some of our business is with the government. We'd like some more."

"Go on."

"We know something big is up, up in more ways than one, at Cape Kennedy." He put up his hand. "Only from piecing together what's public knowledge. But we don't know exactly what. And to get in with the prime contractors we have to know exactly what."

"Go on."

"I can feed you all sorts of figures pointing to something big going on down there. Shipping, manufacturing, employment—"

As Buglewicz frowned, Nick hastened to cut in on himself.

"Like I said, no going into defense secrets, no doing anything to breach national security—"

Buglewicz waved that away.

"Funny, I haven't heard anything. You'd think they'd have—" He smiled. "Touches my vanity. I like to think they call me in on everything new." His face hardened. "I too

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would like to know what. Still—"

He got up abruptly and stood facing the window. He blubbed his lips with his index finger. Nick fidgeted.

"Well?"

"You're going to a lot of trouble."

"We do things in a big way. You'll be making a mistake if you make too much of it."

"Once you say 'too' of anything, you beg the question."

"The question is still 'Well?' "

Buglewicz turned. Sleepy eyelids over wide-awake eyes.

"Count me in—with conditions."

"Name them."

"I'll have to do this on my own, away from the Institute."

"Office right next to mine."

"Computer time."

"You got it."

"And man doesn't live by thought alone. A nice little refrigerator with a nice little bellyful of goodies."

"Done."

Buglewicz smiled.

"Sure you want to go through with it after all? A fish thinks there's a hell of a lot more to an iceberg than there is."

H-DAY MINUS 26

NICK WALKED IN, KICKING crumples of printouts left and right. Buglewicz tossed him another wad. Nick toed it on the fly.

"Where are we now?"

"Where was Moses when the light went out? In the dark."

Buglewicz walked over to the nice little refrigerator. He picked through it, slapping together a thick miscellany of a sandwich. He took a big bite and talked, chewing.

"But things are shaking down a bit. We know a lot of things it isn't."

He pulled open a beer can, walked to the window, and took a big swallow. He looked down at Wall Street.

"But the thing it is still eludes—"

He squeezed his eyes shut against a burst of sun-glitter pane. He stood quite still. He said softly, "By God." He stepped away from the glare and opened his eyes. He returned to his desk, set the sandwich and beer can carefully down. He moved around to the touch-tone telephone set that tied in with the computer center and leaning over it began to tap the keys.

Nick took a step toward him. Buglewicz shook his head.

"Leave me alone for ten minutes."

"Sure."

Buglewicz didn't look up when Nick came back in after twenty minutes. He worked so hard at not looking up that he looked further down.

The sandwich lay on the desk with no second bite out of it. The beer level looked the same, allowing for evaporation and flatness. A fresh yard of printout had taken a crisscross of heel marks on the floor. The brief slant of sunlight had slid away.

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Buglewicz shoved himself up out of his chair. He stood with his back to the window. He clasped his hands under the catenary of his belt. He eyed Nick as if really weighing him for the first time.

"I have to know something about the sun."

"The sun?"

"You know. The big wheel that shines by the grace of God. I want to get hold of the latest spectroheliographs from Mt. Wilson or maybe even from the space platform."

Nick stopped himself from saying, "Spectroheliographs?" He said, "Who would have them?"

"Since I'm not working on this for the Pentagon, my need to know would carry negative weight. Let's see, there's an astrophysicist—I forget his name, it'll come to me—who might know. Boyd Sandsmark, that's the name. Last I heard the was at Cal Tech."

"Boyd Sandsmark. Okay. Use your name?"

"God, no. I don't know him all that well, and I don't trust him not to spill it back to the government. And you do want to keep it quiet, don't you?"

"I'll get on it right away."

"Good. I have a feeling that . . ."

"That what?"

"I'm surprised at you, Tallant. You should be able to finish it yourself."

"That we don't have much time?"

"That we'd better make hay."

Nick took a handful of change and ten grand from petty cash and went out to a public phone. He spoke to Tony Chestnut over the cheesebox.

Tony couldn't spare Ferro just now but made up for the turndown by giving Nick a number to call in L.A. and by telling him to commandeer the company plane.

Nick went to another phone booth, got the number in L.A., and told the voice to find out about an a-s-t-r-o-p-h-y-s-i-c-i-s-t name of Boyd Sandsmark in or around Pasadena and put a tail on him. Then he taxied to his apartment and packed for a short trip.

Before boarding the Delphic Enterprises plane, Nick had to sign a paper giving up all claims on the company for any and all damages.

"One of these silly formalities, Mr. Tallant."

Nick signed. Wind lifted the form as he started to hand the clipboard back. He noted the name on the waiver form below his.

"Another passenger?"

"Yes, sir."

"Martha Washington?"

"She often uses the company plane. A different funny name each time. The company lawyer says it's all right."

Martha Washington wore a yellow sweater and pink bell-bottom slacks. She was shrugging out of a

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black sable coat as Nick climbed aboard. A somewhat sharp chin gave her a nice witchy look. Wrap-around sunglasses. Bouncy shoulder-length honey-blonde hair.

"Damn. I would go and take this coat with me."

He moved to help.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Thanks. It's black."

"So?"

"So on the West Coast, it's a dead giveaway you're from the East Coast. And this is one of the trips when I want to blend in."

"So you can leave the coat on the plane or in a locker when we land."

"That's too easy."

Her eyes lit up behind the sunglasses. Nick saw she was going to take his hand. He quickly wiped it on his pants leg. She took his hand and tugged him forward.

"You seem to be the big shot. C'mon in case he won't listen to me."

They entered the cockpit. The pilot slid his earphones away and smiled.

"Listen, Handsome. When we reach the coal-mining area, Pennsylvania or West Virginia, make a pass over some one-horse town."

The pilot looked from her to Nick and frowned a bit.

"Gee, I don't know. It can get you in bad with the board when you stray too far from your flight plan."

"Once you say 'too', you beg the question."

"Come again?"

Nick fished out his wallet and handed the pilot a C-note. The pilot nodded.

"I'll let you know when to light your lamps."

Martha Washington kissed him and pulled Nick back to their seats. They strapped in.

When they were in the air, she opened her overnight bag. It was half full of bundles of currency. The other half held a bottle of red wine and Saran-wrapped sandwiches.

"Lucky for you I packed a lunch for two just in case."

She handed him the bottle and an Italian cork-puller. He uncorked the bottle and filled the styrofoam cups she held. He bit into a roast beef on Jewish rye.

"This is the only way to go."

He sublimated the hunger her body heat, her woman smell, aroused. He knew now who Martha Washington was. Not the mother of her country but den mother to The Boys. Marta Vallejo. She served as a Mob courier, carrying black money skimmed from the gambling tables, payoffs to politicos, deposits to numbered accounts.

And Don Vince Podesta's mistress, or at least protegee. Before that she had been Nathan Shapi's. After Nutsy died of lead poisoning, she let Vince back her try at a show biz career. Vince bankrolled lessons, special material, gowns, furs, jewelry, publicity, record promotion, ce-

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lebrity parties—the works. He put her records in juke boxes coast-to-coast, booked her into night spots and on a few TV shows.

Too bad the kids didn't keep spinning her disks. But she was tax-deductible. That was the way Don Vince would like to keep a mistress, on Uncle Sam.

Marta Vallejo. Nick knew by her smile that she was taking in the way he was taking her in now that he knew who she was.

The pilot's voice broke up that bit of mutual feedback.

"Black-lung country, folks."

Marta looked at Nick.

"You know what I have in mind?"

Nick nodded. He got up. He braced himself solidly and opened the cabin door. With one hand he held himself against wind stream and plane bank. He reached back his free hand. He looked around.

She was running her hand over the fur, fluffing it up with her breath, smoothing it.

She caught his glance.

"Just saying good-bye."

She handed him the fur. He started to throw it but her voice stopped him.

"No, wait till I tell you." She pressed her face to a window. "I'm looking for a shackety place on the edge of town with a small vegetable patch in the shadow of tailings."

Nick waited, fuming.

"There's one. Throw it now."

He flung the fur. It unbunched and planned like a flying squirrel. Nick shut and dogged the door and sank in a seat. Marta kept her nose to the window following the flight of the sable as long as she could, and longer.

"Okay, folks. I'm going to straighten out and fly right."

Marta sank down beside Nick.

"I hope the right person finds it."

"Someone like you were a few years back?"

She looked at him and smiled.

"Yeah, a few years back."

"Nice gesture, but you're not that crazy. You're going to file a claim with your insurance company for one lost black sable coat."

"Insurance? What insurance? When they find out who I am they don't sell me insurance."

"My apologies. You are that crazy."

She wrinkled her nose at him.

"You know it."

Someone, the pilot perhaps, had brought a newspaper aboard and left it on one of the seats. Marta picked it up. She swung the sunglasses up, resting them on her blonde hair. Green eyes. She sat reading the daily astrological forecast. Everything else in the sheet seemed to bore her. She looked up to catch Nick smiling at her.

"You ever erect your horoscope?"

He stared at her, smiled again, shook his head.

Marta studied him and at the same time gave him her three-quarter face, the nose nicely inside the

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curve of cheek, the eyes toward him. This made her gaze quizzical.

"What's your birth date?"

He told her.

"You're a Leo. That goes good with what I am. I'm a Virgo. If you crack a smile, I'll bust your head."

"I hope you don't mind if I break out in a yawn. I'm dead beat."

Her eyes flickered but her face didn't change. Maybe she thought the shadow of Don Vincenzo Podesta fell across his mind whenever he looked at her.

"Sure."

She turned back to her dos and don'ts for the day in the paper.

Nick leaned back and closed his eyes. If his mind weren't on what lay ahead in L.A., damned if he wouldn't be making a play for her, or making believe to be, to pass the time. Don Vincenzo Podesta or no Don Vincenzo Podesta. But it was as well he didn't feel up to pressing the small-talk button. He'd be talking of one thing while thinking of another—getting the spectroheliographs from this Boyd Sandsmark—and would not come off looking the way he'd want to look in her eyes.

He woke up, a turbulence in his belly. The plane had hit a hole in the air. For part of a second they were weightless. Marta got her breath back.

"Hey, I wonder what it would be like to make love in zero gravity!"

The sunglasses hid her eyes, the paper had slipped from her lap. She too had been dozing.

Neither went back to sleep for the remaining hour of the flight. They spoke little, as befitted small talk. They came down in L.A. under an incubus of cumulus.

Nick let Handsome help her down. A man waited for her in a car near the apron. She waved to the man, gave her overnight case a slight tap, and nodded. She turned and called to Nick before she got into the car.

"So long, Leo."

The shopping center in Pasadena looked like a shopping center anywhere, only more so. Nick paid off the cab driver and headed for the supermarket. An old man in Salvation Army uniform stood by the door. The man held an armful of magazines and whispered *"War Cry"* to people who passed.

Nick took a *War Cry*, handed the man a sawbuck, waved away the blessings. As he walked into the store he opened the magazine to the center fold and turned the outside in. At the meat counter he stopped beside a man his own age or younger who also carried a *War Cry* with the center fold on the outside. They stood gazing into the convex mirror for spotting shoplifters.

"Hi, Nick, I'm Tommy."

He could tell Tommy was going to try to make an impression on the wise guy from back East. He nodded. Tommy tried.

"We really went to town on this guy Sandsmark. We—"

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Nick turned to glance down at the franks. Red cellophane beefed up the pale pork.

"Okay, you can cut out the red cellophane. Just give me what you found out."

Tommy opened his mouth.

They weren't blocking the aisle, but the wheel of a shopping cart clipped Nick's foot. Nick met the glare of a woman wearing a kerchief over curlers. Nick smiled. He dropped the *War Cry* and opened his arms.

"Madam, you're the thousandth customer this week and you get our free ham."

He heaved the biggest ham he could find into her shopping cart.

"Just tell the checkout clerk the district manager said it's all right."

"Gee, thanks. Thanks a million."

"Our pleasure, ma'am."

Nick strolled off with Tommy tagging along. They made their way outside. Tommy started to toss his *War Cry* away. Nick stopped him.

"We don't want to get picked up for littering."

He took the magazine, set it to rights, and handed it to the Salvation Army man.

"You've got some real hard-core inspiration there, Major."

He saluted and headed for the parking lot. Tommy hurried around him to lead the way to the car.

"This here's Jimmy. Jimmy, here's Nick. He's a friend of ours."

Jimmy sat at the wheel of the air-conditioned Buick. Nick nodded and Jimmy nodded a heavy head back. Nick and Tommy climbed into the rear seat. Tommy drew a folded Xerox from an inside pocket.

"The guy's credit report."

It told Nick that Sandsmark was white, Episcopalian, 35, divorced (twice), had no children, had his Ph.D., an associate professorship at Cal Tech, his own home (mortgaged), a late model Chevy (he usually traded in every other year), held odd lots of various stocks having a market value of $8,000, had a savings and loan account with a current balance of $400, was slow to pay, but otherwise nothing derogatory was known about him.

"I got word just a few minutes ago, Nick. He's home now. There's nobody there but him. He didn't show up for work the past few days. Didn't bother calling in sick. When they called him up and asked was he sick he said yes he was sick and hung up. He got a delivery of a case of Scotch this morning. Teacher's. Went out once last night, to a whorehouse. Only stayed a short while. The girl says he had a hard time getting it up, like he was just going through the motions. She says it was funny, he didn't get shook up about it, he just laughed."

Nick grimaced.

"Looks like money's our best bet. We'll see. Let's go."

They pulled up behind a car that was parked around the corner from Sandsmark's street. Tommy pointed

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out how a space between houses gave them a view of Sandsmark's driveway and the late model Chevy, and a rosebush. A man got out of the car in front of theirs and walked back to them. At a nod from Tommy he spoke.

"He didn't go out and nobody went in."

"Okay, you can go." Tommy turned to Nick. "We're going in to see him now?"

"Yeah."

The man had taken a step away. He came back.

"I'd wait a few minutes. There's a dame down the street starting to walk her dog."

They waited in the dusk. The woman passed Sandsmark's with an Irish setter all feathery eagerness. The dog wanted to stop and make, but she hauled on the leash till they reached a lawn two houses further along. She stood gazing skyward with the tail of her eye on the picture window overlooking the lawn. They finished their business and returned home.

Jimmy drove around and pulled up behind the Chevy. Nick and Tommy got out. Tommy touched a rose, then spat on the bush.

Nick leaned on the doorbell. He wondered how hard he'd have to lean on Sandsmark.

The door opened at last.

"Who tolls?"

Jesus, a cunning drunk. Nick flashed a press card.

"We're doing a story. A feature on the sun. We need a reliable source. We're told that's you. Naturally we protect our sources. And we pay well."

"The sun?" But it wasn't a question. "Just what do you want?" That was a sharp question.

"We'd like to get hold of the latest series of spectroheliographs." The corner of Nick's eye caught Tommy giving a start.

Nick pressed steadily against the door, and Sandsmark gave without knowing. Nick stepped past.

"Thanks."

Tommy followed him in. Sandsmark stood still a moment, then closed the door.

"Who says I have them?"

"Ah-ah. I told you we protect our sources."

Nick looked around. Sandsmark's undershirt, bare feet, unbuckled belt, day-old beard, slight sway—these had their counterparts in the litter of the room. A carton for an electric organ stood in a corner. The lid rested athwart the top, helping form an eight-pointed star. Triangles of interior showed the organ still inside.

"Always wanted an organ." Sandsmark grinned. "Have a theory about where to find the lost chord." He frowned. "It's been here a week now. Got to get around to playing it soon."

He followed Nick with his eyes as Nick moved about taking in brand new stuff.

"Always wanted really good

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tackle. Got to go down to the surf tomorrow . . . Always wanted to try my hand at painting. Got to—"

He went to a table, poured more Scotch in a glass, drank.

"Help yourselves. Should be more glasses somewhere. Soda and ice in the kitchen if you insist on the amenities. I just take it straight and say amen."

"The spectroheliographs."

Sandsmark emptied the glass.

"Time, gentlemen of the press. You're wasting your time. I don't have any. And if I did, that's the last thing the world needs."

Nick took out an envelope and began edging bills into view.

"Help you pay for all this stuff. How much you want? One grand? Five? Okay, ten. All in cash so it doesn't have to go down on your income tax return."

Sandsmark coughed a laugh.

"Death and taxes. Friend, only one of them is certain. Hell, I don't need money. Everything's on credit. IOU."

He started to refill the glass. Nick took the glass away.

"We'd hate having to get rough."

Sandsmark stared at Nick, at Tommy, at Nick.

"Rough?" He paled but smiled. He fixed his gaze on the wall and recited:

"O, the Beast his number is six-six-six—
D,C,L,X,V,I to Roman hicks.
Plot these numerals on a graph, observe
How the Beast his descent forms a J-curve."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that's all you'll get out of me if you try to force me to talk. I'm good at self-hypnosis. I've trained myself to repeat only that if someone uses torture or drugs on me."

Nick wet his lips.

"Who said anything about drugs or torture?"

Sandsmark went back a few speeches.

"What does it mean? What does anything mean? The tip of our finger is what we point to. Who are you? Who am I? An identity crisis, for crisis' sake." He held up the bottle. "No more answers. I'm taking the fifth."

He put the bottle to his mouth.

Nick shook his head to hold Tommy's hand back. Nick set the glass down, out of habit giving it a twist to smear his prints.

Sandsmark wiped his hand across his mouth, screwed the cap on the bottle, picked a briar pipe from the rack on the coffee table, dipped up a bowlful of tobacco, thumb-tamped it, struck a match, got the fire going. He looked at the flame till it reached his fingers then blew it out.

"Impasse, gentlemen?"

It looked that way. Sandsmark had no hostages to fortune, not even himself if this self-hypnotism held up.

Nick felt a lot of things press in on him. Sandsmark's stalling. Bu-

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glewicz's sense of urgency. Tony's expectation of results. Tommy's measuring presence. Nick's own uncertainty, his weariness, his out-of-whack biological clock.

He gave Sandsmark a sudden warm smile.

"You've got us wrong, Dr. Sandsmark. We're not your enemies. For that matter, you don't look the kind who'd have any enemies."

Sandsmark bit down hard on the pipe stem.

"Oh, no?"

"Who has it in for you? Who's done you a bad turn? Who don't you like?"

Sandsmark's eyes traversed toward the bookshelves. Nick smiled encouragingly.

"Give us the name and we'll take care of him . . . or her."

Sandsmark took the pipe out of his mouth and cupped the bowl in his palms. He looked into the glow.

"You've got to be kidding."

"Go along with the gag."

Sandsmark laughed awkwardly.

"Well, there's this fellow who's made some nasty comments on a paper I wrote." His eyes narrowed in the smoke. "His name's Fred Globus. He's the kind of bastard gives all bastards a bad name."

"Fred Globus. He here at Cal Tech?"

"Yes." Sandsmark paused. "But I know you wouldn't . . . just to get information out of me." His tongue tripped over itself to add, "Not that I have any information."

"Sure." Nick turned to Tommy. "Get Jimmy in here." And when Jimmy got in there Nick told Jimmy, "You stay here and keep Dr. Sandsmark company. Don't let him get too drunk. If the phone rings, nobody answers. If the doorbell rings, nobody answers. Got it?"

Jimmy got it. Nick looked up Fred Globus in the phone book. Tommy nodded. Passing the rack on the coffee table, Nick palmed and pocketed a pipe. He paused in the door, causing Tommy to stop short. He pointed out a four-band radio to Jimmy.

"Put the radio on the police band. He might hear something about his friend."

Sandsmark was sitting still, staring at nothing.

Tommy slid the Buick into a Tenants Only parking slot. He had known the address to be in a block of bachelor apartments. It looked and sounded that to Nick. Tommy reached past Nick to open the glove compartment. He took out an accordion of doctors' disposable plastic gloves, tore off a pair for himself and a pair for Nick. He took out a .45 with a silencer on it. He hesitated, then held it out to Nick. Nick gestured that Tommy might do the honors.

Nick rang 6E, got the buzz that let them into the building, and they walked up to 3B. Light showed under the door. Good, they wouldn't have to celluloid in and wait for

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Globus to come home. Nick worked his fingers in the gloves, then rang the bell.

The door opened on a big smile.

"A little early, Nan—" The smile shrank. "Oh."

"You Fred Globus?"

"Yes?"

"You know a Boyd Sandsmark?"

The smile was never there.

"Yes. Why?"

"Because we want the right Fred Globus." Nick listened to the apartment. "You alone?"

"Yes. Why?"

Nick put his hand on Globus's chest. Globus looked down at the gloved hand. But it was the gun in Tommy's hand that backed Globus into the room. Nick closed the door. The whole place was orange and black, like Halloween.

"Why? Why?"

Nick looked at Fred Globus, seeing Fred Globus and growing angry with Fred Globus for grabbing his sympathy.

"Why? Because. Because you ask a foolish question."

He nodded at Tommy. Tommy squeezed off five shots, the last four after Globus was down.

Nick took out Sandsmark's pipe, snapped the stem, and pocketed the bitten end. He rolled bowl and stump of stem out of sight under the couch. He squatted beside Globus, rested his palm on the warm brow and thumbed back the left eyelid. The brown iris didn't shutter against the stark light. Dead.—

"Okay, Nick?"

"Okay—" He looked up. He couldn't think of the name.

"Tommy. Tommy Corvino."

Nick got up. The too-quick rise from the cramping squat dizzied him slightly. For a tick of time his skull was a cave of winds. His head cleared. He smiled nicely.

"Anything to Nunzio or Renzo?"

Tommy laughed.

"In a way. Nunzio's my pop and Renzo's my uncle."

A tightening of the throat, a seething of the mind. It was tempting to fix it so Tommy took the fall for this hit. But the mission came first. Too, he might be able to get at Nunzio and Renzo themselves more safely and readily if he got Tommy to trust him.

"Okay, let's go."

As the Buick pulled away Nick saw a girl go into the building. He wondered if that was Nan—Just in case she wasn't he had Tommy stop on the way back to Sandsmark's, and he used a phone booth to tell the cops in a hoarse whisper that Globus was dead, and where.

Tommy started to stop the car again, at a dark corner.

"What for?"

"I thought I'd ditch the gun in the sewer."

"No, there's a better place to plant it."

Tommy smoothed the dirt around the rosebush while Nick leaned on the doorbell. Tommy dusted his

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gloves and helped Nick wait. Then he said, "Excuse me, Nick," and brushed past Nick to whisper fiercely at the door.

"For Christ's sake, Jimmy. When he said don't let nobody in he didn't mean us."

The door opened and they pushed in. Jimmy stuck out his lower lip.

"I was just making sure it was you."

Sandsmark sat where they had left him. His face took on a death-suck as he tried to bring life back to the fire in his pipe.

Moving nearer, Nick and Tommy picked up a low background noise of police calls.

"He like to fell over in a faint when he heard about his friend on that."

"That how he got the knot on his head?"

"No, that was before. I had to cold-cock him. A car come and a guy rang and rang the bell, and when the guy turned away, this one looked like he was going to yell out, so I—"

"Had to cold-cock him."

"That's right."

Nick turned away. He put Tommy between him and Sandsmark and shoved the bitten mouthpiece of the broken pipe down behind a seat cushion. He moved around again to stand in front of Sandsmark.

"We did you a favor. Now it's your turn."

Sandsmark looked up.

"Bastards. I was doing you a favor. Now I want to tell you."

He got up on the second try and crossed to a pile of magazines. He pulled out a *Financial World* and shook from it a Xerox flutter of charts and figures.

Nick let Jimmy pick the Xeroxes up for him. He squared them and folded them neatly in three before pocketing them.

"This better be the goods or you'll fry for your friend."

Sandsmark smiled a twist of lemon.

"Here it's the gas chamber. But that's the goods and we'll all fry for it." He shook his head at Nick's stare. "I'm not touched in the head. At first I figured you for FBI or CIA trying to trap me. But now I know who you are. Not that it really matters any more, you're goddamn revisionists."

"Should I cold-cock him again?"

"No. He's right. We're goddamn revisionists." Nick signed to Tommy and Jimmy and led the way out. But he paused in the door. "Just don't brood about what happened, Sandsmark. If you find it stays in your mind, say to yourself 'O, the Beast his number is sick-sick-sick'."

In the car, after five minutes of driving in silence, Jimmy spoke from the wheel.

"I'm a hunch player. I'm going to get five bucks down on 666."

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H-DAY MINUS 25

NICK UNFOLDED THE XEROXES, placed them face down on the desk, and started to iron the creases with his thumbnail.

Buglewicz reached out with the eraser end of his pencil and pulled the copies to him in quick stabs.

"In case you've been wondering what a genius needs with erasers."

He looked to be reading the sheets clean. He nodded impatiently when Nick asked him if that was what he wanted. He swung half around and tapped the keys of the touch-tone telephone set. Then he waited, his eyes pulling at the print-out strip.

The computer typed back.

Nick glanced from meaningless figures to expressionless face. Then Buglewicz nodded slowly.

"That's it."

"What's it?"

"I'd rather not say what it is till I can say what to do about it." His face looked suddenly drawn, yet his eyes burned. "Let me save it till tomorrow, Tallant. I want to go back to the Gotham Towers and sleep on it."

Nick grimaced.

"Okay."

Tony Chestnut had sent Ferro to the offices of Delphic Enterprises on some errand. Ferro stopped in to ask Nick how things were coming along.

"Tomorrow will tell."

"It's always tomorrow, ain't it?" At Nick's look he spread out his hands. "I mean in everything, in life."

Nick frowned, unappeased. Ferro was eyeing him with a flickering smile.

"Something wrong, Ferro?"

"You lost your cherry." The smile was fixed. "You know the kind of bang I mean. Wherever you been, you lost it there."

Now you're one of us. About time, kid. I was beginning to wonder about you. He could see that much in Ferro's face.

What was it Ferro saw in his face now? Did Sirhan Sirhan look any different before and after? Did the face take on a wary triumph?

Ah, that was for the ding-a-lings. There was no such thing as the mark of Cain. Ferro had heard something from Tony or was only guessing. There was no such thing.

Maybe not, and he couldn't see it himself in the mirror, but he had a date with Clara Dellaripa that evening, and she saw something.

She even said, "You look different, Nick."

"Different how?"

"I don't know. Different."

"You're getting to know me, seeing more facets."

Aside from that, it was almost a replay of their first date. But when they said good night, Clara's hand was firmer and warmer. And her kiss pressed harder and longer.

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H-DAY MINUS 24

NOON AND STILL NO BUGLEWICZ.

Nick kicked himself for not thinking to put a tail on Buglewicz. He kicked himself for letting Buglewicz stall him.

Buglewicz's room at the Gotham Towers didn't answer. Had Buglewicz run out? Had he dropped dead?

The cheesebox brought Ferro.

"Hi, Nick. It's tomorrow. You find out what it's all about? Tony's—"

"You do some finding, Ferro. Find me a hotel thief who has Gotham Towers keys."

Nick and Ferro passed through the sitting room into the bedroom. No Buglewicz. No Xeroxes.

Ferro swung open the closet door. Naked coat hangers rang changes, wrangling, tangling. Signs of hasty packing. But Buglewicz hadn't checked out. He seemed to have taken as much as he could stuff in an attache case and sneaked out.

Ashes in the ash tray. Buglewicz didn't smoke. Nick stirred the ashes, uncovered charred bits of note paper.

There was a pad on the writing desk. Nick switched on the desk lamp. He craned the gooseneck nearer and slanted the light. The shadow of writing.

The sun the sun the sun the

"Geez, Nick. Do you know how many places there are in the Poconos?"

"Well, you just keep on poking your nose. There shouldn't be too many places with Buglewiczes staying at them."

Ferro started to drag himself out of Nick's office.

"Wait a minute, Ferro."

Ferro waited while Nick got Buglewicz's think tank on the wire and was Abercrombie & Fitch wanting the doctor's vacation address spelled out—Dr. Buglewicz's handwriting was a bit hard to make out and they did want to get the fishing tackle to him without any delays that might spoil his well-earned holiday.

The voice at the think tank understood about the handwriting, showed surprise at the fishing tackle, and spelled out the vacation address.

Ferro went out with more bounce. And with a photocopy of Buglewicz's face, front and side. Nick's secretary had dug the photos out of newspaper morgues and had just come in breathless with copies she had run off.

Nick angled the slats of the blind against the slant of the sun and wondered what had made Buglewicz pick up his feet before picking up his fee.

"Hello, Nick?"

"Find him, Ferro?"

"Well, I find the cottage, little ways north of Delaware Water Gap. But he ain't there. And who also

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ain't there is mama B. and the six baby B's."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Seems mama B. got a long distance buzz this afternoon and packed up and lit out, her and the kids. She drove the station wagon to Philly. I find out the license plate and phone ahead, and the boys in Philly make it and stake it out. But it's got a couple chalk marks and tags for violating a meter, so it don't look too hot. They must've pulled a switch."

"Okay, try that angle. Bus, air, train. You've got their descriptions?"

"Yeah. That all?"

"Wait. That long-distance call. Where'd it come from?"

"Oh, yeah. The Gotham Towers."

"Damn."

"Yeah. From a pay phone in the Gotham Towers." Pause. "That all?"

"Hold it, Ferro. Hold it. Why from a pay phone? Why not from his room if he's going to beat the tab anyway?"

"Yeah, why?"

"What was the time of that phone call?"

"Less than three minutes. He didn't have to put in nothing extra."

"Not that time. Time of day."

"Oh. Yeah, I got that too. Two-thirty."

"That's when we were in the middle of going through his room." Pause. "He skipped out hours before. So why was he still hanging around the Gotham?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Because the tricky bastard figures it's the last place we'll look for him. He doubles back. He waits for another desk clerk to come on. He's slapped on a fake mustache or beard, bought another piece of luggage. He stands straight, sucks in his gut, and checks in again under another name."

"Geez, Nick, I'll give odds you're right." Pause. "But why would he do all that?"

"Yeah, why?"

Ferro made the hundred miles back to Manhattan in time to help Nick finish setting it up. They handed the button men photocopies of Buglewicz's face, front and side, and the button men covered the Gotham Towers, front, sides, and back.

Driving didn't take it out of Ferro the way it took it out of Nick. Ferro had lots of zip left and picked himself to be one of the men to go in and plant the smoke bombs in the service closets.

At that they almost missed Buglewicz. He crossed them up by coming out in a waiter's getup. He held the coat in front because he had popped the buttons, and that was what drew Nick's notice.

The big beams lighting up the smoke pouring out of the windows, the flashing reds down on the street, the rumbling engines, the yelling firemen, the unkinking hoses—in this blur of sound and blare of light

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that broke up his form, his being, Buglewicz was slipping through the fire line into the dark when Nick spotted him.

Nick gave the office, and he and a couple of his men moved in. Cops were all around, doing fine work clearing the hotel and keeping the people back, but Buglewicz did nothing to catch the eyes or ears of the cops. The air went out of him, fluttering the fringe of his phony mustache.

He gave Nick a nod and a one-sided smile.

"Burning down the haystack to find the needle. At least I beat you out of using the magnet."

"Your family? Yes. But we can always find your wife and kids if we really have to."

"All right, Tallant. You won't have to."

Nick led Buglewicz to the ambulance they had there, if they had to make out to be treating him for hysteria or smoke poisoning. They got in but a cop stopped them before they could pull away.

He brought over a real case of hysteria, and they took her inside the ambulance. But once they got going and turned a few corners, they slowed long enough to dump her.

"Shock treatment, lady."

They rode the rest of the way in sterile silence. The ambulance let them out at the service entrance, and they rode the service elevator to the Delphic Enterprises floor.

Buglewicz settled himself in his chair. Nick sat on the edge of the desk. Buglewicz peeled off his mustache. It winged to the wastebasket like a tiny sable coat.

"What gave me away, Tallant?" Buglewicz's mouth set in a twist. "Don't tell me. The phone call."

"We left off where you were going to the Gotham Towers and sleep on it. We pick up where you say what it is and what to do about it."

"First we bargain."

"Wrong. We made a bargain."

"Still, before we go any further we have to know where we stand with each other."

"Okay, we've got all night. But let me see if I can help you step it up. You holed up because you figured out who I'm fronting for, what Delphic Enterprises is all about."

Buglewicz looked shocked.

"Not at all. After I ruled you out as a foreign agent, I knew what Delphic Enterprises is all about as soon as you posed the problem. I'll tell you, I was on the point of farming it out, but the thought of hiring out to the Mob tickled me."

"So working for the Mafia doesn't bother you."

"Whomever I work for, I'm just doing my thing. Hell, Mafiosi don't think they're evil. Do the lion and the jackal feel guilty about being the lion and the jackal? They're just doing their thing. Everything's up for grabs and Mafiosi want theirs—and somebody else's."

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"Why do you say 'they'? Why don't you say 'you'? I'm part of them, remember."

Buglewicz smiled.

"I'll say 'we'. I'm throwing in with you, remember." His smile died and left no ghost. "No, it's what I found out from the data you fed me that bothered me. That bothers me."

Nick's fingers bit up under the overhang of the desk.

"And that is?"

"Let me tick the items off. The space platform is a reality. Men are out there assembling and equipping something. For nearly a year now, rockets have been lifting off from the Cape and rendezvousing with the space platform. The first payloads were prefab units fitting together to make a cylinder six miles long and twenty-four hundred feet thick. Later payloads were nuclear reactors to generate electricity. Now the payloads are a hydroponics farm, and more freeze-dried foods, vitamins, medicines, and clothing than a town of five thousand would need for five years."

"What—"

"And upcoming payloads, to go by the manifests your dockers and truckers pass along, are also verrry interrresting. A seeds-eggs-and-embroyos bank; a deep-freeze Noah's Ark of useful flora and fauna. Teaching machines to train youngsters to be engineers, doctors, dentists, farmers, nutritionists, maintenance men. A complete hospital. A sanitation plant recycling human wastes. Machine shops. Laboratories. The world's literature and technical knowledge on microtape. Astrogation data, with focus on Proxima Centauri, the nearest solar system, some four-point-three light-years away. And last, but most, a tachyon drive to boost the cylinder through space at nearly light-speed."

Buglewicz stopped and looked at Nick. The twist of smile came back.

"What's it add up to? Readout: the government—rather, one hand that's not letting the other hand know—is getting set to send five thousand men, women, and children to Proxima Centauri. I can see that's verry interrresting, but where do you come in? How do you get your hot little hands on the hot big money?"

"That's right. The thing must run to billions."

"Twenty billion easy. But forget the money. It's too late." Buglewicz broke out in a sweat. "Don't you get what I've been telling you? What the spectroheliographs mean?"

Nick shook his head. He was beginning to be afraid he did get what Buglewicz had been telling him.

"Look, Tallant. Here's a crash program so hush-hush it's almost over before even you and I hear about it. Why? Because the panic is on in a very small circle. Why? Because the sun's going nova."

Nick forestalled Buglewicz with a wave of the hand.

"I know what going nova means.

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The sun's going to blow up. Jesus. I thought it was going to take trillions of years for the universe to run down."

"The universe, yes. This is just a local event. The pop of a flash bulb. Getting back to our own scale, the sun's been burning for five billion years. Its hydrogen fuel normally would last another five billion. But the spectroheliographs show a sudden and serious hydrogen drain. How? Why? Who the hell knows. Maybe there's a huge hydrogen-eater out there, an inbreathing super-dragon. All we know or need to know is, when the bell rings, it's Nova calling."

Nick found himself on his feet, his fist hitting the wall. He stopped, turned.

"Wait. Who's going to get away in the spaceship? Who're the five thousand?"

"Guess. Do you read the papers? The President and his family and the Cabinet and their families plan to do some yachting in Florida waters this summer. The Pentagon's announced it's opening a summer school in space sciences at Cape Kennedy for a select group of officers. Key Congressmen and their families have a standing invitation to attend. The National Association of Manufacturers moved its annual convention down to Miami and up to July. And so on."

"So July's the deadline."

"Now you're reasoning, Tallant. Now you can see the way my mind ran. Once I caught on, I had to make the break and then try to reach whoever's in charge of the operation and beg or finagle or blackmail my family and myself aboard that starship out there. But you aborted. Now here we are."

Buglewicz got up and stood behind Nick. He put a hand on Nick's shoulder.

"As Newton—Huey Newton—has said, 'If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.' Well, Tallant, am I part of the solution?"

Nick nodded.

Buglewicz patted the shoulder, went back to his chair, and put ball point to note pad.

"If I'm thinking the way they're thinking, about forty Saturn VIII rockets should begin moving onto launching pads in the next few days." He smiled. "Setting up for a big July 4th. Each with a payload of 125 passengers for delivery to the starship. All right, let's try on a Western scenario. Think of the rockets as mounts waiting at the hitching rack. A prairie fire threatens to engulf the town. The horses belong to the banker and the big rancher and a few other good guys. But a bunch of the boys from the saloon grab the horses and dust out of town. How does that sound?"

Nick grinned.

"That sounds like a hell of a hot July 4th."

Buglewicz waggled the ball point.

"Their deadline is roughly July

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4th. Our deadline is nearer Easter Sunday. Look. We might take the launch complex and hold it for a while and get off a few rockets. But we'd never get away with the starship if we try to pull the hijack at the last minute. If they had nothing more to lose, they'd H-bomb the complex and the starship out of spite. Give them hope that if they don't destroy the launch site they'll still have the means and the time to build another, though much smaller, starship."

"Easter Sunday. Doesn't give us much time."

"Nobody has much time. And all life's a gamble. Beginning with which spermatozoon hits the jackpot. And ending, for now, with whether this starship will find a home."

There was no calendar in the room. Nick found himself looking at the clock.

It was already the next day.

H-DAY MINUS 23

"HELLO?"

"Hello, goombah."

"This Bugle guy been giving you sour notes, hey?"

"He's all right now."

"That's the way."

"But were not."

"No? Tell me."

"It's going to take a lot of telling."

"Nice day for fishing."

"See you."

Click.

Click.

Frustration among the motes.

Ferro, on the flying bridge, held the *Figaro,* a forty-four foot; triple-cabin fiberglass power cruiser, in a lazy circle out on Long Island Sound off New Rochelle, the sun shadow-boxing the compass.

Tony Chestnut lay on deck aft, soaking up sun, the tight coils of steel hair upward of his slacks storing energy. Nick Tallant spoke to closed eyes. Only the now and then tightening of Tony's lips showed him Tony was awake. Or was Tony dreaming bad?

"Goddamnit," Nick wanted to say, "have you been taking it in?" He said, "About Buglewicz and his family . . ."

Tony stirred, shaded his eyes, sat up looking around.

"Sure. If we go we take them. We can use him."

Tony spoke absently. Nick knew Tony was right. The "if" was all. Till then everything was a side issue. Now Tony looked very much present.

"Okay, kid. You and Bugle work it out. You done all right so far. I got things to do too. First thing I got to do is call a meeting of the Commission. Day after tomorrow'd be the soonest and the latest. I want you in on it to take them through this thing in baby steps so they know what we're up against." He laughed. "Yeah. You be the briefing officer."

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Tony stood up. He faced forward, hooked his little fingers in his mouth, and whistled. He nodded shoreward when Ferro turned to look. He braced for the breaking of the circle, then moved to the fishing rods.

"On the way in let's see if we get anything that looks like a fish."

They sat staring into the wake and at their trailing lines. They weren't getting anything that looked like a fish. Tony spat into the wake.

"Oh, yeah, Nick. Another meet. Vince got word out he wants to see you."

Nick smiled.

"You mean talk to."

"I mean see. In person. Face-to-face."

"Sorry, goombah."

"Okay. How you get in to see him, his lawyer phones ahead he needs Vince to sign something important. The papers'll be waiting for you at the company plane. Get down there this afternoon and back here tonight."

"Do I tell him the score?"

"I'll tell you what to tell him. Tell him the government's building a base up there, a space city, a bridge to the moon, something. Tell him the real thing and he'll panic, have us putting everything into busting him out." He smiled reassuringly at Nick. "Don't worry, kid, we'll spring him in time. But we got to keep our eye on the ball. We can't tip our hand. If the heat's on we can't do nothing about the other heat." He glanced at the sun.

"I get you, goombah."

"Now get this. He's going to be getting it off the wire anyway, so tell him we're having a meet. Tell him it's to plan how to take our cut of this space thing. And watch it, kid. Make him believe you. Because why he wants to see you is maybe he already has the feeling we're holding out on him."

Tony put on his gaudy Hawaiian shirt. When he wanted, he could be as sloppy as Detective Rocco Urbano.

On the way in Nick saw only a stingray and sewage.

The guards had shaken him down, had even taken apart his ball-point pen, had all but x-rayed him.

"Nicholas Tallant. So you come to see old Vince."

"I'm here on Mr. Podesta's business."

He heard a laugh in his head, then Don Vince's whisper.

"I like that. You show respect. I know that screw. All smiles to my face. Before I leave here I see he gets screwed."

Then a fainter voice, another's.

". . . a visitor, Mr. Podesta."

Don Vince's voice again, loud, still in the head.

"I got a visitor? Me? Who would want to visit old Vince?"

Then, before he was ready, Nick was coming to a stop just inside a small room. It was large enough to hold an oblong table and a chair on

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each of the long sides. The walls had a clock and pictures and no doubt eyes and ears. Don Vince came in through the facing door.

Nick made a bowing nod.

Don Vince carried an exercise book.

"You take me away from my homework. Can you beat it, everybody in here don't finish third grade got to go to school."

"Oh?"

An eerie sensation to listen and speak and hear both his voice and yours echo, the double sound of what struck your ears and what spoke inside. What also threw him was that he was seeing Don Vince for the first time since his initiation and felt like a raw kid again.

The man wasn't impressive-looking—till you looked in his eyes. People always avoided his eyes at first, then thought it might look funny to him, and so tried to meet his eyes. Don Vince listened to his feelings. His feelings had been right about something big being up. What did his feelings tell him now about Nick?

Nick bent a bit, not wanting to be too much taller than Don Vince. Don Vince nodded.

"Where'd you go to college?"

"Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration."

"Harvard? You shoulda went to Yale. You might of picked up something about locks."

Nick couldn't tell if Don Vince was putting him on.

Don Vince took a chair and after a moment gestured for Nick to take the other.

"Yeah, I all at once got time to read. I been reading up on this guy Buddha. Where he goes wrong is when he seen the old man, the sick man, and the dead man he shoulda said that's the way it is and forget about them. Then about giving up the prince business. Well, maybe he's tried waiting for his pop to kick off and the old guy is too close guarded to do anything about that. But when he seen the monk and made up his mind to do like that, instead of leaving his wife and kid, he shoulda drug them along when he went begging to up the take. What do you think?"

"You've got something there."

"Damn right. Religion. It's all a gamble. What the hell is this grace anyway? Just another word for luck. You got to make your own luck. To do that there's only one thing to know. There's rocks and there's windows. Okay, what's new?"

Nick handed him the papers and a ball-point pen.

"I've brought some papers for you to sign."

"Yeah, yeah. Important papers." Don Vince scrawled his name without looking. "What I sign away? Atlanta?" He stared at Nick. "No news at all?"

"Oh. My uncle's adding a big room upstairs. The whole family's going to throw a party to celebrate. A kind of housewarming."

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"That's nice."

Nick breathed easy when Don Vince gave no sign he wanted Nick to ride once around to give the details.

Don Vince got up. Nick hurried to his feet. Vince let himself gently up and down with the tips of his toes.

"I'll make book you're some guy with the dames."

The muscles of Nick's smile fought those of his tightening throat. Did Don Vince have the idea or hear a whisper that Nick Tallant was playing fast and loose with Clara Dellaripa? Nick spread out his innocence on his palms.

Don Vince was nodding at his own thought.

"There's a person I was thinking of sending you to see how the person is, but I changed my mind. You got enough to do." He gazed at Nick. "Clara's a nice girl."

"Yes, sir. Very nice."

"That's right. A young man couldn't do better. Clara make a good wife."

"Yes, sir."

"When you see Clara say hello for me."

"Yes, sir. Sure will."

Don Vince went out with his exercise book.

Nick didn't let himself let out a sigh. Don Vince would hear it in the head through the walls.

Nick picked up the papers.

Don Vince had kept the ballpoint pen.

The same hoarse voice came over the loudspeakers in a thousand wire-rooms.

"Results of the last race at Far Niente. Baciale first by a length, Mezzo-Mezz' second, Acquaccia third."

The wire-room regulars in the front room did double-teakes and asked each other "The last race at where?" and scratched their heads over the scratch sheets. But wherever it was it was something they hadn't kept track of and hadn't got down on and they quickly forgot it.

In a dozen back rooms out of the thousand, the man in charge of the big book, which handled lay-off betting for the area, lifted his head at the name Far Niente and listened hard.

The men and women at the adding machines and the phones didn't look up when he rose and went out to make a call.

As the jet circled waiting its turn to land and the lights of the New York metropolitan area flowed in a stream of pinpoints, it began to hit Nick. All that and all that meant would wink out as the sun winked out.

The nova would seem a pretty pinpoint when its ghost light reached other worlds.

He was all that remained of his father. Whatever few made it away would be all that remained of the family of Earth.

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"Hello?"

"Hello, goombah."

"Go okay?"

"Yes."

"Good. Okay at this end too. I set up the meet." Pause. "Look, you won't feel too bad if I say—I won't say lay off—I'll say don't see too much of the granddaughter for a while. You got enough to do. You got to put all you got into this thing."

"I won't feel too bad, goombah."

"Ciao."

"Ciao."

Click.

Click.

Frustration in the sifted moonlight.

H-DAY MINUS 22

BUGLEWICZ TORE OFF THE strip of printout.

"Enough. There's a time to put in and a time to put out. I'll draw up the flow chart, with single blocks representing complete logic tables. You work out the logic tables with decision rules for selecting the manpower and for transporting, quartering, and supplying same. Better tack on an else rule in each table as insurance, and then we'll compare notes and tie everything together. Try to stay with limited-entry tables. But if you have to, go to extended-entry."

Nick nodded.

Before he set to work himself he watched Buglewicz sit down to a sheet of paper and start drawing boxes, jotting symbolic notation in them, and linking them. A DNA molecule for survival took shape.

H-DAY MINUS 21

LAY YOUR LEFT HAND ON THE Bible and Long Island Sound is the space between the fingers and the thumb, Long Island being the thumb and the shoreline of Westchester and Connecticut being the opposed edge of the forefinger.

Eleven pleasure craft set out from eleven marinas along the inside of this italic *l*. They made for the middle of the space, where *Figaro* rode. Ferro on the flying bridge sail-ho'd.

First to reach *Figaro* was a motor launch flying a fun-flag—Wife A-shore, showing a witch on a broomstick. It circled *Figaro* once, looking her over, then pulled alongside the ladder on the port side. A guy held it and Tony leaned down to help Don Pezzo of Buffalo aboard. It was a stiff climb for the old man, but he trusted more to his own hands. The launch headed back.

Formal bows and handshakes began, their permutations mounting as the other ten came aboard in quick order. It grew crowded on deck.

Don Pezzo muttered that he had to go take a leak and climbed carefully down the companionway ladder. He looked sharply at Nick, who was tacking a linen bed sheet to a

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bulkhead. Don Nappy Mottola of Cincinnati followed Don Pezzo. He looked at Nick and seemed to change his mind about what he was going to say to Don Pezzo. He drew his handkerchief, slowly, and patted the wetness of his brow and the blueness of his lips.

"Jeez, what a bright day. I got me a sunburn already."

"Yeah."

Don Pezzo went to the head. Don Nappy stared at the bed sheet for a moment.

"What the hell is that for? We gonna see stag films?"

Nick smiled.

The others came down but Nick lost sight and sound of all but one when their talk told him which was Don Renzo Corvino of L.A. He burned the round, smooth face into his brain.

Don Pezzo came back, still tugging at the zipper of his fly. Tony, standing in for Don Vincenzo, gestured. The twelve sat down around the table, which stood at full stretch. Someone—Ferro or Tony himself—had dealt hands of twenty-one to mark a cluster of four places. The dealer's pack lay at Tony Chestnut's place. The cops might break the deal with Don Vincenzo and roust them. If the cops did board the cruiser and wondered why the boys weren't up on deck fishing, the boys were only playing a friendly game of blackjack.

The dons glanced at the cards and at Nick up against the bulkhead, but each of them was looking at the others as though Christ had just said, "One of you shall betray me."

Tony broke the ice.

"We wet the beak?"

The dons nodded. Tony spoke over his shoulder.

"Get the beer and stuff ready, Nick. I'll call you."

Nick went to the galley. He waited, hearing only a low murmur, till Tony called him. He brought in a tray of cold cuts and a cooler-seat full of beer cans.

Tony was last to help himself. He was first to eat and drink. The others watched him for a minute before they bit and gulped. Cigars began to light up. Tony beckoned Nick forward again.

"With respect, listen good, gentlemen. This is a scientific thing. Go ahead, Nick."

The air had grown foul with smoke and food smells, but once Nick began all queasiness left him.

"The sun's a ball of fire. It's been burning nice and slow for a long time. But now it's beginning to burn faster and faster. It's going to get hotter and hotter. Pretty soon—"

The youngest, who had to be Don Tito of Tampa, cut in.

"I see what you're leading up to. We move into air-conditioning and refrigerating. If that's the big emergency—"

Tony curled one corner of his lip.

"Go on with it, Nick."

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Nick slowly pulled out a tiny transistorized projector, another spin-off of space research. He snapped a cartridge of microtape into the projector. Asking Don Pezzo to excuse him, he set the projector on the table, pressed a button, and the beam focused itself on the bed sheet. All faced the screen. Nick shut the door and drew the drapes and the screen brightened.

The special effects experts of Delphic Enterprises' film subsidiary had done a rush job on the microtape presentation: a job Nick had represented as being a spot commercial to show a prospective advertiser of heat lamps. Nick clicked the first frame into place and established the solar system. More clicks showed the sun exploding and, as it exploded, charring and vaporizing the planets. Nick went through it again, pointing out Earth and showing it disappear, then waited, listening to the silence.

Don Nappy began to breathe in rasps. Don Fausto of Detroit smiled uncertainly.

"I got a swell bomb shelter. Real deep."

Nick shook his head.

"No bomb shelter's good enough."

"You sure? I used my own construction company and a hell of a lot of highway cement."

"With respect, you can stay in it and see, if you want. But nothing's going to ride out this fire storm."

Don Nappy Mottola half rose. His face grew splotchy. The blood surfaced in a deep flush. The veins wormed through the flesh. He dropped dead. They knew but made sure.

Don Renzo Corvino almost busted a gut laughing high-pitched laughter.

"I always thought he had a subpoena heart, but Tony here knew better. What did he have?"

Tony frowned, then gave a half smile.

"A real bum heart, looks like."

"No, I mean what pieces of what action?" He looked around for smiles. "Don't you get it? Tony done all this to throw a big scare into Nappy and make him knock himself off."

Tony shook his head slowly.

Don Renzo's grin greened. Under cover of finishing his beer, Don Charley Leggate of New Orleans popped pills into his mouth. Don Pezzo's cigar grew cold in his teeth. Still they shared with the others looks of regret that they weren't here to cut up Nappy's action.

Nick gazed at Renzo Corvino. A pig of a man with a look of conceit even now. Why couldn't it have been Renzo Corvino who had the bum heart? But that would've been too easy, leaving him to heaven or hell. Nick started. Tony was telling him to go on up and see if the Sound was clear.

As he climbed the companionway he heard Tony tell the others there'd

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be a brief adjournment to dispose of the matter at hand.

Long Island Sound can get choppy and turn mean suddenly. Nick held to the rail and watched a sailboat in poor trim scud and heel across their bow. He climbed to the flying deck to tell Ferro to sing out when the boat got far enough away, then went below. When the sail was nothing more than a grave accent on the Sound, Ferro sang out.

They dragged Nappy up on deck. They had wrapped him in tarpaulin and chains. Nick and Tony shoved him overboard. Don Guido of St. Louis had volunteered to chop off the fingers and knock out the teeth. He followed Nick and Tony to the rail and cast Nappy's identity on the waters, in a bloody paper towel.

Don Tito was watching him closely.

"All of it."

Don Guido grimaced, opened his left fist, and three gold crowns and five silver fillings flashed over the side.

Don Charley seemed to feel he had to say why he clutched at the rail. He looked away from a swoop of gulls.

"The sea got a good head on it."

Tony gestured the dons back down the companionway, and they took their places at the table. Nick leaned against a bulkhead.

Don Pezzo stabbed the air with his dead cigar.

"Why? Why the sun blow up?"

Tony looked around the table.

"Because we took the prayers out of the schools. Who the hell knows why? What the hell difference does it make why? It is, that's all." His gaze circled the table again, but no one seemed about to challenge his sudden air of mastery. "You all look like it's the end of the world."

Don Fausto surfaced a quaver of a smile.

"Well, ain't it? That's what you and your bright boy been saying."

"Sure. It is. But not for us. Go ahead, Nick."

Nick straightened. He launched into a spiel on the starship, telling them what it was like and how it would yank five thousand away from the world's doom and to another solar system where hopefully there'd be a homelike planet to ferry down to, then waited for questions.

Don Renzo Corvino broke the silence.

"What we eat?"

Nick looked away from him and told them how, to eke out and then supplant the provisions, they would grow hydroponic vegetables and protein-rich algae.

"It's a completely closed ecological system. What that means is, plants live on the carbon dioxide we breathe out and we breathe the oxygen they give off. Sunshine and cleaned-up shit will make them grow and cleaned-up piss will water them. We put out more water than we take in, so water's no problem."

Don Pezzo chewed his cigar.

Don Renzo's jaw dropped.

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"Vegetables. Seaweed. No meat?"

Nick shook his head.

"No veal parmigiano. No chicken cacciatore." Then he had to add, "Not until we get down on this other planet and breed cattle and fowl again. And maybe we'll find new kinds of meat already there."

"But nothing till then?"

"That's right. Unless there's some meat in the walls." He let them stare a moment. "They made as much of the walls and the insulation and the furnishings as they could out of pressed dehydrated food."

Don Fausto nodded.

"Like the ice cream cone."

Don Tito frowned.

"Yeah, but we don't eat the whole thing or we're out there with nothing around us."

Nick smiled.

"Oh, there'll be plenty left to stand on. That's another thing, spinning the ship to give it artificial gravity."

They were staring at him again.

"We put english on it so there's something to stick to."

Brows smoothed, all but Don Charley's.

"This light-speed. I guess that's really traveling?"

Don Tito looked at him disgustedly and answered for Nick.

"You know how fast a bullet goes? Well, then."

Don Charley's brow smoothed. Don Tito's creased.

"Hey. How we get on this starship?"

Nick opened his mouth, saw Tony stir, and gestured to him.

Tony took over. There was a light in his eyes when he saw how they looked to him.

"To pull off a hijack this size we got to have maximum security. We don't tell the button men the real score. First, because we don't want no leaks. And second, because not all of them get to go." His gaze circled the table. "Like Nappy. With his bum ticker he couldn't of stood all them g's anyway."

They all looked at Don Pezzo. He was lighting a fresh cigar. He glanced up without letting the flame lose touch.

"Don't worry your heads about me. If I pass a physical or no, I still got a stake in this. I got young ones I want to live on."

Tony nodded.

"That's the way. You all know your own people, so you can pick out who goes and who stays. We each of us choose 416 from the Families we speak for. Soon as you get back to your area make out a list of the young and the strong. Nobody past the change of life. Scratch anybody liable to go stir-crazy on the long trip. Put down the thing each man is good at, and the women too, so we know how to use them to pull this off smooth. And rush me the list."

Don Tito raised a finger.

"Twelve times 416 comes to 4,992. Who gets the extra eight people?"

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Tony eyed him.

"If you put it like that, I do."

He looked around. No one kicked up any more fuss.

"Okay, then. To bankroll the operation we're gonna need a special assessment on all the take.. A ten percent tax surcharge." He overrode a rising murmur. "I been in touch with Don Vincenzo and he says do it like that."

Don Fausto lifted his head.

"Yeah, hey, what about Vince?"

"I told him not to think about it any more, we'll bust him out in time."

The dons looked at his straight face and at each other. A few dared to smile. Then they all laughed to the point of tears. The ten percent tax surcharge passed without further talk.

Till it was time for them to go they cut up touches, often in a Sicilian dialect Nick couldn't follow. Ferro sail-ho'd. Nick rose as the dons filed out, Tony seeing them off.

Nick sat down again as they showed their heels up the companionway. He stared at the blank screen. After a while he saw nothing was playing there. He got up, took the bed sheet down.

The hand of blackjack at Tony's place had the ten of diamonds showing. Nick turned over Tony's down card. The ace of spades.

Nick went up on deck. He cut a glance at the sun, a plastic chip. All bets were down.

Tony Chestnut leaned on the rail watching the boats of the dons split for shore. A net of light and shadow fell up from the waves to catch him.

"Nick."

"Yes, goombah?"

"Get me a rod."

Before Nick could get his jaw back up to say "Who—?" Tony had spat overboard and added:

"It must be the fingers. Jesus, the fish are biting and no line out."

"Oh, sure. Right away, goombah."

Tony caught a flounder that went over a pound.

H-DAY MINUS 20

NICK REACHED DOWN INTO Cape Kennedy and straightened a rocket on its pad.

He faced around again. The dozen men, in their twenties and thirties, were staring down at the model. It was another quick materialization by the special-effects experts of Delphic Enterprises' film subsidiary, for the shooting of a mythical pilot of a series, Jumpoff, that would never get off the ground. Now it stood in the high noon of a hundred-watt bulb in a Brooklyn warehouse and looked almost too real, making them realize what they were really up against.

Nick's glance flicked past Tommy Corvino's face.

"We confirm forty rockets. Each takes 125 people. You see how they're spread out all over the lot so no one lift-off shakes the others too much. Now, the way we analyze it,

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they plan to send the rockets up at ninety-minute intervals. One docking with the space platform per revolution, unloading the passengers and getting them through the space platform to the starship docked at the other end, then blowing the rocket away in time for the next one to dock. Don't worry about that now; I'll have models to show you how that works. The point here is that forty times ninety minutes comes to two-and-a-half days. We don't have two-and-a-half days."

He let that grip them, then went on.

"We couldn't hope to hold the space center that long. Even if they wanted to lay off, counting on setting it up once more, the whole world would know by then the Mafia was hijacking a starship—and why. The panic would be on, everybody heading for the Cape. You couldn't mow them down fast enough."

He tightened the grip, then went on.

"What we do is get the rockets off with minimum headway. One shoot every fifteen minutes. That doesn't get all of us aboard the starship, but it gets us all in orbit in ten hours." A doted line of rockets in parking orbit was how Buglewicz had put it to him. "The first rocket transports 125 of our commandos to the space platform. It docks and we take the platform and the starship and make the technicians cooperate. Then we worry about rendezvousing with the other thirty-nine rockets. Clear so far?"

So far it seemed clear.

"Okay, then. Now if you guys will stick aound, your cots and bedding will be along soon, and you can bunk down right in here with Cape Kennedy. You're going to live with it, and with detail maps of it, for the next few days."

He gave a mock salute and made for the door. A guy with consciously shrewd eyes caught up with him.

"Danny Mottola. Now I see how this would make Nappy drop dead on you. But you know, even though Don Pezzo hopped over to Cincy himself and swore up and down on his mother it happened like that, our Family had their doubts. I came, but if something happened to me or if it still smelled fishy, it would've been war."

Nick nodded.

"Sure, Danny. Only natural."

As the elevator leveled at the ground floor and let him out, Nick heard the tailing off of a car horn outside the warehouse door.

Johnny Vecchio, gun in hand, made for the door. Johnny gestured with his mummy-wrapped head, and Nick stepped to one side. Johnny looked through the peephole, then slid open the panel in the door and shook his head, denying the outside world.

A car door opened and slammed. Ferro's voice reached Nick.

"Johnny? It's me. Tony sent me."

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The bandaged head made a small arc a big no.

Nick moved in to see past Johnny. Ferrro stood outside, pale.

"You know who I am, Johnny."

"Nobody said nothing about you coming in."

Ferro didn't like it but it was plain he wasn't about to get heavy with Johnny Vecchio. Johnny was the best enforcer going. They said Johnny's eyes had built-in cross hairs. Right now the eyes were about all you could see of his face. A few months back a stoolie had fingered him for a dozen hits. The stoolie made it an undertaker's dozen. But playing it safe, Johnny had undergone plastic surgery. This past week Tony Chestnut had pulled Johnny out of the Family's private nursing home where the new face and the new fingertips were healing. Tony needed every gun he had and Johnny could hole up at the warehouse and at the same time stand guard.

Nick moved in to let Ferro see him. Ferro talked past Johnny.

"Tony sent me to get that list of stuff to take along."

"It's okay, Johnny."

Johnny slid the panel to and opened the door. Ferro slipped in.

Nick took the list from his pocket. He glanced at it. Cesium in rubber bulbs each holding 250 grams, platinum, misch metal, selenium, copper, thorium, rubidium, molybdenum, columbium, beryllium, rhenium, scandium, silver . . .

Buglewicz had been urging Nick to get the Families to liquidate their soon-to-be-useless assets and convert the soon-to-be-useless cash into something useful—a strategic stockpile of minerals rare on Earth and possibly rarer on their future home. Utility not rarity was the criterion. Buglewicz put gold way down on the list.

It seemed Tony had bought the recommendation. Nick handed the list to Ferro.

"I'm glad you caught me." This would be tough to carry out, and time counted. But that was Tony's worry. "Tell Tony that I guess I don't have to tell him that the open market isn't the only place or the best place to get a lot of the stuff."

Ferro grinned. Hijacking was something he understood.

"Can I give you a lift, Nick?"

"No, thanks. I'll walk over a block and catch a cab. You hurry on back to Tony."

Johnny looked through the peephole, then opened the door.

It was warm for March. These days warmth gave Nick a chill. He walked on the shady side where the thermometer gave mercurial solace.

Tony Chestnut stared at the list. He felt himself grow with rising anger. Why hadn't he ever heard of most of this stuff? According to Nick and Bugle a lot was worth more than gold.

He shrugged. No use crying over what he had missed out on. That was all over. They were starting on

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something new, something bigger than ever before.

He smiled. Getting a lot of the stuff would help keep up the look of things. They couldn't suddenly have a no-crime wave. Look too funny. The johns would begin to wonder what the Mafia was up to.

He frowned. Better play it safe. He needed all the soldiers he had where they'd do the most good, out on the street. He'd let expendables pull the tough ones.

He looked up, aware that Rose had laughed when he smiled. Why did she always have to try so hard? Now at his scowl she put her hand to the cross in her cleavage. He looked away from her, at the parakeet. A parakeet, for Chrissake. What a dumb bird. He ought to wring the pet shop guy's neck for putting one over on him. The damn bird was supposed to be a talker but from its first day here in the house it hadn't said a damn word.

Why Rose wanted a parakeet was beyond him. Maybe she mixed parakeet up with paraclete—Holy Ghost, dove, all that kind of thing.

Well, it wouldn't be for long. Still, she didn't have to know that yet.

H-DAY MINUS 19

ROSE CASTAGNA WAITED FOR the five o'clock mass because it was less crowded and there would be less of a crush for communion. Speranza Dellaripa had the same idea. They ran into each other outside church at the sign advertising bingo night.

Speranza asked Rose how Tony and Sonny were. Rose said they were fine. Rose asked Speranza how Mike and Clara were. Speranza said they were fine.

Rose asked Speranza how Clara and Nick Tallant had been getting along on their dates. Speranza asked Rose what dates and said there had been none after the first couple.

"Clara say why?"

"She don't know why. He just didn't call again."

"I think maybe Nick's busy. I know Tony is."

They looked around.

"Mike too."

"That's it, then. I had a feeling something's on. So you don't have to worry. Nick's a good boy."

But Rose felt guilty. She felt even guiltier after they went in and holy-watered and crossed themselves and took communion. She handed in the regular envelope and the special envelope. Both crinkled nicely. Rose had a thing about money. She had to have brand new bills, mint green. But she still felt guilty about Nick and Clara.

She remembered Tony's anger about her matchmaking. Maybe Tony'd rather fix up Sonny with Clara. Maybe he was keeping Nick busy to break it up between Clara and Nick. She felt a sudden warmth for Tony.

She wouldn't ask him about it,

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though. He had a lot on his mind. His clothes hung loose. They didn't fit him as snug as when that dirty cop, that Rocco Urbano, had frisked him at the airport and that must be less than two weeks ago.

Maybe she would make a novena, for both Sonny and Tony.

Rose stopped reading and looked across at Tony. He sat thinking again. He did look thinner.

She waited to speak. When the poor little parakeet moved in its cage and Tony's eyes went to it, she spoke.

"How'd you like chicken cacciatore for supper? We still have some."

"Fine. Why, something about eating in that book?"

"Huh?" She hurried to make something up. "Why, yes. Isn't that funny. A few paragraphs back the boy and the girl were going on a picnic."

She reddened because Tony was smiling. He knew that was all she read—romances and books of etiquette.

"You like picnics? Maybe we'll go on a picnic one day soon."

He sounded like he was being funny, so she smiled. She used a card for listing intentions to keep her place and shut the book. He smiled again.

"You been making a nova?"

"A what? Oh, you mean a novena."

"That's what I said."

"I've been thinking about it."

"I'll give you a tip. Don't take nine days to think about it."

She flickered a smile, then got to her feet and went into the kitchen to tell the girl to heat up the chicken cacciatore.

All through the meal Tony stuck his little finger up to tease her.

For dessert Rose allowed herself two scoops of vanilla ice milk. Ice milk was so much less fattening than ice cream. Tony had a Jaffa orange. The orange reminded Rose of the sun. Tony held it a while contemplating the navel before tearing at the peel.

Tony got up twice in the night and sleepily told Rose twice that from now on he was going to cut down on liquids before going to bed —not so much wine and not so much espresso.

He woke her a third time. She elbowed up watching his face work in his sleep. He couldn't of said that. She must've dreamed he said that.

But now he said it again.

"Our son's gonna die. No other way. It's gotta be."

Without putting on the light and glancing at the mirror, she knew how she looked. No make-up, skin gray, eyes dull. Her hands in isometric prayer. The hell with how she looked. What could she do?

Go to a priest? Use the confessional to tell about it? But who knew if even Father Noto wouldn't—

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No. Anyway, there might not be time. The contract might be in the works right now.

Phone Sonny? Tell him to hole up at one of his SDS friends' place? But there was no safe hole. And if there was, Sonny was stubborn enough not to listen. He hadn't listened before, which was why this was going to happen. She sat up.

What was that cop's name? Strange she couldn't think of it now. She had thought of it earlier today.

Rocco. Rocco Urbano. Yes. A day or so after that happened at the airport Tony told her, told her with a big smile, about Urbano going off airport detail and away to Staten Island and fourth platoon at that.

Urbano would be on duty now. She slipped out of bed. Not the house phone. If there was a tap, the cop listening in could very well be in Tony's pay. That had happened.

Just a coat over her negligee. Her change purse. Make sure she had the right change. A pair of loafers. No telling how far she'd have to walk to find a phone booth.

Then she remembered Tony's ace in the hole—the outside wire Tony felt sure the law knew nothing about. Far as Rose knew, Tony had never used it, saving it for the big need. This was the big need. She hung the coat back in the closet, stepped out of the loafers. Tony snored. She whispered her feet downstairs, timing them to his snores.

The way she understood it, the phone worked a phone in an apartment a couple of blocks over. That was all there was in the apartment, a phone. Tony paid the rent and the phone bill through enough go-betweens to keep anyone from guessing it was him paying and was happy just to know the phone was there waiting. At this end the phone was hidden under the fireplace mantel that lifted like a lid after you moved the bric-a-brac.

She was alone down here. The couple slept in a nice apartment over the garage. But now that she had the phone in her hand she wondered if she could make her finger dial it to call the police even to save Sonny.

She finally found the right precinct, but Urbano was taking a squeal and she said she'd call back.

It was first light and to have something to do she took off the parakeet's cover and fed and watered the bird.

She sat waiting by the phone. She would give Urbano another ten minutes before trying a fourth time. She jumped up. Tony was coming downstairs.

She shoved the phone into its space, swung the mantel down, and put the bric-a-brac back.

Tony spread himself wide in his silk pajamas and dressing gown.

"What you doing down here?"

"I wasn't sure I checked the gas knobs before going to bed."

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He sharpened his voice on her skin.

"You look for gas knobs in the living room?"

She started to say that she had come in to feed the parakeet, but Tony could see that for himself and was laughing at the joke he had made. Then Tony cut himself short and eyed her closely.

"You been having hot flashes?"

She shook her head after a moment. She joined him at the foot of the stairs, then began to follow him back up.

The parakeet spoke in Rose's voice.

"Hello, Detective Rocco Urbano, please . . . No, just him . . . No, I'll call again later."

Tony turned. He looked at the parakeet.

"Say that again."

The parakeet said that again, again in a scratchy Rose's voice.

Tony's glance shot to the mantel. Rose saw that the bric-a-brac looked shifty.

"What the hell you know, that ain't no parakeet. That's a stool pigeon. Rose, you should've told it what happens to stool pigeons."

Rose shrank against the wall as Tony stepped down past her. He strode to the cage, opened the door and reached in. He swore when the beak plowed his hand, but he didn't pull his hand back. He grabbed the bird's neck and squeezed. Feathers fanned in a flurry of local heat death. When the bird hung still, Tony dropped it. He withdrew his hand and sucked the slash.

He turned to Rose. He looked sleepy. He spat blood.

"Okay, why?"

"Because what you said."

"Turn around and look at me. What did I say?"

"You said, 'Our son's gotta die.' "

"When did I say that?"

"In your sleep. Tonight."

"I see I gotta tape my dreams. They sound interesting."

"Tony. Please. Let Sonny live. Send him away somewhere. Anywhere, so long as he lives. Please."

"Sonny." The word seemed to taste strange in his mouth. Then a funny smile came over his face. He wiped it off. "You didn't get through to Urbano?"

She weighed lying. If she said she had got through to Urbano and had told him Sonny was in line for a hit, would that make Tony cancel the contract? Not Tony. He knew they would never trace it to him. Anyway, it would pass for accident or suicide. Tony would have seen to that since it came so close to home.

"No."

"Up." And when she didn't move, "You pee. Up."

He followed her up to their bedroom and waited till she sat on the bed. Then he put on a pair of gloves and went into the bathroom. She heard him empty a bottle into a glass of water. He came back still muddling the solution with a spoon. He handed her the glass.

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"Drink. It'll do you good."

No.

The word clung to the roof of her mouth, the ghost of an inert mass. She took a sip, then finished it in one rippling swallow. She set the glass down on the night table. She looked at him, at the clock reading 5:24, then closed her eyes and lay back.

H-DAY MINUS 18

THE MAN OF THE COUPLE carried the bird into the kitchen and showed it to the woman.

"Looks like there'll be a double funeral."

"Wonder why he—"

"You know he was sore with it all along because it never said word one. And now she's done gone he feels free to— Here, you throw this in the disposal. I better go out and wash the car."

The Castagna family doctor, a house doctor at a Family-owned hotel, bore witness that Mrs. Castagna was clearly in a muddled mental state when she took an overdose of sleeping pills.

The coroner quickly agreed.

The manager of Skies Unltd. looked around to see that all his people were in the hangar. Then he pressed a button to shut the hangar door and mute the airfield sounds.

"You all know by now that Skies Unltd. has just changed hands. Now here is Mr. —" he glanced at the card in his hand—"Nicholas Tallant of Delphic Enterprises to tell us what's ahead. Mr. Tallant."

Nick smiled at the tight faces of the pilots, instructors, chute packers, and office staff of Skies Unltd.

"Welcome to the fold, ladies and gentlemen. Right off the bat let me set your minds at rest. There's not going to be any shake-up. There's not going to be any economy drive. There will be a bigger and better Skies Unltd. We're going to set up a pension plan, bonus system, and profit-sharing. You're all going to be busy busy busy—and get rich rich rich on overtime."

He waited for the updraft of laughter to die away.

"To prove Delphic Enterprises means business and brings business, I point out to you the boxes over in that corner. They're full of coveralls, parachute harness, and Manila sick-bags."

He waited again.

"Skies Unltd. pioneered in skydiving. Now we're going to pioneer in giving the public the same thrill of weightlessness the astronauts know and in the same way the astronauts train for space flights. Our customers will get about a minute of weightlessness each time the plane zooms up and over in an arc—to you pilots, a Kepler's parabola; to you others, a roller-coaster path. Twenty-three of these minutes in every three-hour flight. Busy busy busy, rich rich rich. I come to you

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with a list of 125 men who've already signed up for these flights."

He waited for the gust to blow over.

"We also have a hundred-plus young men and women who'll be taking a crash course—now there's the wrong word—an intensive course, in helicopter piloting."

He laughed with them.

"Now I'm going to get out of the way and let the mechanics get on with padding the planes. Thank you."

The personnel of Skies Unltd. clapped loudly. Being part of Delphic Enterprises looked like being part of one big happy family.

Nick phoned in on his way back from Lakewood, New Jersey.

"Any messages?"

His secretary sounded weary.

"Dr. B. beefing about the refrigerator breaking down and the food spoiling. I ordered him a new one and a new supply. And your mother called."

Nick sighed and dialed his mother's number.

"What is it, mama?"

"Nick, you know I never call you unless it's important." His mother sounded weepy.

"All right, what is it, mama?"

"It's your Aunt Rose. She died this morning."

"Oh? How?"

"They say she put herself to sleep. I can't believe she did it on purpose. Not when it's a mortal sin. Father Noto doesn't think so either, and since they put it down official that it could be an accident, he's going to bury her in the Church."

"That's good. I mean it's too bad about Aunt Rose. I'm really sorry to hear it, mama."

"You know the church? Tomorrow morning at ten."

It was really too bad. A good half day would be shot.

H-DAY MINUS 17

THE MOURNERS KNELT AT THE candle-cornered coffin and moved on to their seats. Nick saw Tony's face through a circle of lilies, wreathed in sorrow. Sonny, red-eyed under his long hair, sat beside Tony.

Nick went over to them to mutter words and shake hands, then joined his mother. She looked him over sharply, then turned her cheek to his kiss and patted his arm.

Clara Dellaripa sat with her mother and father and her uncle, Tommy Dee. Clara saw Nick and nodded with a sad smile.

Nick gave back the nod and the smile and bowed his head as if communing with his own sad thoughts and, to his own surprise, began feeling real sorrow. Father Noto in white smock and stole, carrying a Missal, broke in on it by telling what a good and generous daughter of the Church the dear late Rose Castagna had been.

At last Father Noto took a sprinkler from the pail the server carried

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and shook it over head and foot of the coffin. Like settling dust before sweeping.

The cortege pulled away, all the limousines burning their headlights palely in the sunlight. Standing on the curb outside the church, a stranger, most likely an FBI man, took off his hat to the hearse.

As they left the grave, Nick saw Tommy Dee glance fearfully at the sun and turn to Tony Chestnut.

"Don't it seem to you to be getting hotter?" He looked around. "I mean the sun."

Tony gave him a funny smile.

"How do you spell that?"

H-DAY MINUS 15

MONTAGE OF (1) BLACK POLICY players making bets at candy stores, bars, restaurants; (2) black collectors placing the bet money and slips in envelopes, sealing the envelopes, and writing code numbers on the envelopes, checking the time, and hiding the envelopes behind hallway radiators and in candy store magazine racks; (3) black pickup men picking up the envelopes and taking them to a black controller; (4) the black controller tearing open the envelopes and separating the money from the betting slips, stuffing the slips into a paper bag, counting the money into three envelopes, stashing one away for himself, delivering the bag of slips to the policy bank for black clerks and bookkeepers to tally, with a white man checking the ribbon, and taking the thick money envelope to another drop, handing the thinner envelope to a white cop on the way.

Close-up of black hand counting crisp thousand dollar bills into an envelope. It stops. A white finger admonishes. A voice says, "Don't forget the ten percent surcharge." The black hand hesitates, then counts in ten more thousand dollar bills. It passes the envelope to a white hand.

Pull back to show the white man smoothing his sharp jacket over the envelope.

Multiply him by thirteen as he leaves, one for each of the large policy banks in central Harlem, South Bronx, and Bedford-Stuyvesant. Thirteen different white men step out onto thirteen black streets and head for parked cars. Some hunch over themselves, others lean over backwards using a strut to prop the backbone. Each feels uneasy because the boss has taken away the man with the gun for some hustle or other and because a man in black beret and dashiki and goatee and dark glasses is following him. Each quickens his pace. But at an alley or a doorway another man in black beret and dashiki and goatee and dark glasses steps out and bars the way.

Cut to close-up of one black hand holding a switchblade for upthrust.

Jump-cut to beat cop spotting a man sitting on the sidewalk and

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leaning against a storefront. Thinking the man's a drunk sleeping it off, the cop kicks him. The figure falls over.

Cut to close-up of note someone has pinned to the back of the stiff's sharp jacket. It reads like so: LESSON NUMBER ONE. WHITEY, GO HOME.

Tony Chestnut sent for Tommy Dee and Wingy Podesta.

They had never seen him so pale.

"This would never happen if we didn't pull the security men off for this other thing. It can't be Hype Creamer. He don't have the guts. Somebody's behind him. The cops don't know who. Not that they don't wanna know. They wanna know, all right. They're worrying about their ice. They're all on it in all seven police precincts, everybody from the beat cop to the precinct captain. But nobody was on the street or looking out a window. Everybody black is deaf and blind. You go to Harlem and see if Hype Creamer is deaf and blind. We gotta have law and order while we organize this other thing or everything will fall apart."

Tommy Dee and Wingy Podesta went to Harlem.

Don Vincenzo Podesta heard about it even before he heard it on the seven o'clock newscast.

Thirteen reputed mob figures stabbed to death in black sections of New York City at practically the same stroke of the clock.

He smiled.

They sure needed him on the outside. This would never happen if he was free.

Still, it damaged the Family image. He would get word out to spill a lot of black blood to even the score.

H-DAY MINUS 14

HELLO?"

"Hello, goombah. Bad, huh?"

"And getting worse. I sent Tommy and Wingy. They never come back."

"That looks bad all right for Tommy and Wingy."

"Yeah, yeah. Look, I want you to pull a couple dozen of the best men off this other thing."

"You mean fly them back?"

"That's what I said."

"But that would screw up the whole schedule."

"Well, what else can we do?"

"How about throwing gold instead of lead?"

Pause.

"It's your idea. You try it. If it don't work, we do it the other way and screw the computer."

"Thanks for the good wishes, goombah, in case I never come back."

Click.

Click.

Frustration.

"I know I shouldn't be calling you, Nick. But it's worrying hell out of my mother. Have you heard

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anything about Wingy or Tommy Dee? Any idea what happened to them, where they went?"

"Sorry, Clara. Nothing."

"Well, I had to try."

She stopped talking but didn't hang up.

"I'd like to see you again, Clara, but I'm all tied up."

"I hope you don't think that's why I called."

"I know why you called. Your mother's worrying about your uncles. I'm only sorry I can't give you good news. If I do hear anything, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Nick. Good-bye."

H-DAY MINUS 13

NICK AND FERRO GOT OUT OF the taxi at Eighth Avenue and 131st Street. The taxi tore away.

They looked around. Catercorners, a beauty shop featured red, blonde, and brown wigs on time. A loan office stood handy. A sign in a window display of sharp clothes on black torsos read, IF YOU CAN'T COME IN, SMILE AS YOU GO BY. A black man eyed himself in black marble facing and smiled as he went by. They turned back.

The Natural Club was one flight up. They went in and up the one flight.

The door let the knock die away a long time before it opened. The black man in the black beret and dashiki and goatee and dark glasses didn't bother to frisk them. The score of men in like get-up sitting at tables and taking apart and putting together hand guns, rifles, and submachine guns told them why, silently but for the Zulu clicks of machined parts.

The man led them to an office, opened the door, and left them. They walked in on Hype Creamer. He waved skin at them from behind his desk.

"I hope you chaps don't hold it against me for not getting up. I carry too much weight to get up easily." He set off a mirthquake. "Speaking physically, of course, not protocol-wise. As you see, I'm more hill than gully." He looked at them out of sudden stillness. "Gentlemen, be seated. You're Nick Tallant and he's Jimmy Ferro. Now, you showed some sense. You at least phoned ahead and spoke softly."

Nick settled himself comfortably.

"I kind of get the impression you're trying to tell us something. But wouldn't it have been friendlier if you gave a squawk to let us know ahead instead of littering the streets with us?"

He watched Hype start to sweat. Hype leaned as close as he could.

"I didn't want any of this. I'm satisfied to go along as always, looking for no trouble with anyone. But these black militants have got the brothers all worked up about shutting Whitey out of the ghettos altogether. Talk about littering the streets. Now when you see that sawdust you know that the mill can't

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be far behind. Go back and tell your capo to cut his losses."

"Why don't you tell your capo to come on in?"

"My capo?"

"He means me, Hype. He means Packo Ledyard. He means he been watching you look everywhere but at the doorway behind him."

Packo Ledyard had a rangy build with quick-action lines, Afro hairdo in topiary trim, shades, and tiger-print dashiki. Packo looked at Hype.

Hype got up easily and left the office. Packo took Hype's chair.

"Yeah. I like to look at people when they're looking at other people. You're looking at me now. Tell me what you see."

"Packo Ledyard. Defense minister of the Black Angels."

"You dig. Looks like you did your spadework."

"The Black Angels made a million-and-a-half haul in thirteen envelopes. How much more do you want?"

Packo puffed out his cheeks.

"Man you belong in a glass case in a museum. The card say 'Bullshit Artist.' Whitey thinks all he has to do is walk in here and walk out with most of the bread. We want all, man. The whole loaf. You been cockroaching on our turf long enough. Black capitalism means black whether the money's clean or dirty."

"You want all. Are you speaking for all?"

Packo smiled.

"True, not all of the brothers groove the way we want them to. Some like old Hype just as soon go along as always, looking for no trouble with nobody. But we show him who can deal him the most trouble. Some want to stay with the easy target, like the Jewish stores hanging in here still. But there's no percentage in that even with Ay-rab gelt backing the anti-Semite bit. I were always looking for the big target, the hard one. And that's you."

Without glancing at Nick or Ferro a black girl in a one-kanga dress came in with a large pizza and a Coke, put them on the desk, and went out. Packo lifted out a wedge, shaping it into a self-scoop, and took a bite. He spoke as he chewed and washed it down.

"What you expect? 'Yassuh, yassuh. Us colored blacks sho' loves collard greens?' Help yourself. Have some—what would it be?—spirito nutrimento."

Nick smiled and shook his head.

"No, thanks."

Ferro, who had started to lean forward, leaned back.

Packo shrugged.

"Okay, you here to rap, rap." He began to beat out a lick with his free hand. "Rap-rap, rap-rap, rap. Wrap it up, wrap it up, wrap it up."

"That a poem by LeRoi Jones?"

"It's a poem by LeRoi Ledyard. I've got rhythm. I've got a sense of timing too. I kind of get the impression you boys are busy with something else—right? Okay, keep a poker face. Anyway, you all of a

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sudden shorthanded for some reason —we leave out the rhyme—so we thought we'd relieve you of your ghetto operations, they too demanding. Now if you got no objections we say good-bye."

"I've got three million objections."

"Well, now."

"But we have to even the body count." Nick overróde Packo's frown. "You said yourself not all the brothers groove the way you want them to. Pick whoever you want as long as you give up at least thirteen dead blacks."

It took a little longer, but it was a deal. Three million bucks in a Swiss bank account for Packo Ledyard and three hundred grand cash to spread among the brothers. In return, six months of normal ghetto operations and thirteen dead blacks. At the end of six months the ghetto operations would come up for renegotiation. Ledyard and the Black Angels would keep the million and a half they had scored.

Nick took up a wedge of pizza. It was still warm. He spoke as he chewed.

"Now that we settled that, how's about clearing up a few things?"

Packo gestured politely.

"Where's Tommy Dee?"

"Ask a fish."

"The East River?"

Packo shrugged.

"And Wingy Podesta?"

"Same catfishegory."

"How about Nappy Mottola?"

"Can't help you there. Sorry."

"Okay. A trick question to see if you were leveling on the others."

"Just you worry about leveling. You only see the dark side of me. If things don't work out, I'll show you the bad side."

They laughed.

"Any Coke left in that can?"

"A mouthful, I guess. You want it to wash that down?"

"Yes. Thanks."

"How did you know you could do business with me? The pizza?"

"No, the tiger-print dashiki."

Packo frowned down at himself.

"How does that say anything?"

"No tigers in Africa. Your negritude doesn't go all that deep. You're just like us."

"Yeah? We'll see in six months."

Nick looked six months through Packo Ledyard.

"Yes. In six months."

"Why you look at me like that?"

"Sorry. I didn't know I was looking anything at you."

"Okay, okay. By the by, this ain't our headquarters—just in case you thinking about having the law bust the Natural Club."

As Nick and Ferro left, a stereo set began to pound, and Packo Ledyard sat listening to acid rock, his eyes shut to hold it in and let it blow his mind.

"Clara?"

"Oh. Hello, Nick. I was hoping . . ."

"About your uncles. I hate like hell to break it to you."

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"Both?"

"Both. But there won't be any funerals."

He could hear her breathe.

"Thank you, Nick."

She hung up.

H-DAY MINUS 12

EVEN THE NEW YORK TIMES gave it a banner head. The story of Mafia retaliation, thirteen dead blacks for thirteen dead whites, carried over into the second section. In the late city edition the make-up man had pied the form, and a few lines dealing with the shadowy doings of the late Raymond (Hype) Creamer found themselves in bed with a small item with a Paris dateline which had the Louvre announcing that the Mona Lisa and a dozen other world-famous paintings would not be on display for a while, as they were undergoing cleaning by experts.

Buglewicz tapped the banner head.

"This gives me to think."

Nick narrowed his eyes, then waved away cigarette smoke that had come nowhere near him.

"And what's the gift thought?"

"Have you considered taking a few blacks along?"

Nick smiled.

"What for?"

"I suppose with mores the way they are, the blacks would have to be females. What for? To deepen the genetic pool. If you stick to one stock, the Mediterranean, inbreeding will bring out the worst of your recessive traits."

"There's more than one stock now. There's you and your family."

Buglewicz gave a Mona Lisa smile.

"That's really what was on my mind. I wanted to make sure you still had us down for up."

"We wouldn't dream of going without you. Besides, herded in like we're going to be for so long, we might need scapegoats."

Buglewicz tapped the paper.

"I was thinking of that too."

H-DAY MINUS 11

FERRO WAITED IN THE CAR while Nick went into Marta Vallejo's motel unit. The jets taking off from JFK Airport made him lean across the seat to rummage through the glove compartment for cotton or something. He finally tore off corners of facial tissue, wadded them, straightened up, and started to plug his ears. He froze in disbelief.

It shocked him to see someone was meaning to stick up Marta. Especially when the someone was no one. Ferro had seen lots of little guys like this at the race track. The big guys paid them a few bucks to pick up losing tickets from the ground to offset winnings. This guy was way out of his class pulling any kind of stickup. And here this guy was going up against Marta. She was like something sacred. Everybody knew she

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was taboo. She and the money she carried belonged to the Mob. Jeez, what was the world coming to?

The guy had missed seeing him, finished tying a handkerchief over nose, mouth, and chin, stuck a hand in a pocket, drew a breath that sucked in the handkerchief, turned the knob with the other hand, and almost tripped over the threshold rushing in.

Ferro fitted the silencer to his Police Special. He took out the ignition key and flicked the hidden switch behind the dash that made it impossible to jump the ignition. Nobody was ever again going to clout a heap of his to go joy riding. He opened the car door noiselessly and kept it from slamming.

He had a celluloid card ready, but he found the latch of the unit door hadn't caught. He eased the door open a crack. The guy wasn't in line for a shot. All he could see was Nick facing the door, hand shoulder high. A slight nod from Nick told him it was okay to widen the crack, and Nick covered him by speaking.

"Listen, fella. It isn't too late. If you put that twenty-two away and leave now, nothing will happen. We'll forget all about it."

Now Ferro saw the man and he saw the twenty-two wavering between Nick and Marta.

The man's voice came out muffled and sounded as if from deeper in the throat than natural.

"Where's the overnight case she came in with?"

Marta saw Ferro now and saw he wanted her to move to one side and give him a clear line through the man. She clutched at herself.

"My heart!"

It was nearer her appendix, but it looked real enough for a swoon. At least it got her out of the way. The man was bending stupidly toward Marta when Ferro squeezed off a shot.

Ferro saw he had got the guy, but he saw a goddamn ricochet had also nicked Marta.

It turned out to be only a chip from a plastic-top coffee table and only a scratch in the fleshy part of her arm. Nick gently pushed Marta toward the bathroom.

"You go in there and start taking care of that, and I'll be right with you."

He strode to the bed, peeled blanket and top sheet back, lifted the pillow, and pulled out the bottom sheet. He bunched the sheet under the guy's head.

"Don't want blood on the carpet."

Ferro meanwhile had picked up the guy's gun. Ferro checked it. No bullets. He pocketed the gun. So what if there were no pills in the piece. He hadn't known it and Johnny Vecchio couldn't of done better. He smiled down at the still form. One more for the Jersey Meadows. He turned to Nick.

"You go in there and help her and I'll take care of this."

Nick nodded and went in there. Ferro went through the guy's

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pockets. He came up with a nice but old and flat wallet with papers giving the guy the name Jay Factor. He pulled down the handkerchief. On second thought, the guy looked like he had dough once. Maybe the Mob had cleaned him out, and he figured this was one way to get some of it back. Well, he sure figured wrong.

Ferro went out and switched the ignition doubly on and backed the car to the door of Marta's unit. He unlocked the car trunk and went in and found the body gone.

The sound that came from Ferro brought Nick from the bathroom.

"What did you say?"

Ferro shook his head.

Nick looked at the bodiless space.

"Quick work."

Ferro groped for an answer. That damn silencer. The slug must've just creased the guy's temple, and he got up and snuck out as soon as Ferro turned his back. But Ferro knew the guy's name and would know the guy's face if he saw it again.

"Yeah." Jeez, the overnight case. His eyes rolled till he spotted it on the shelf of the half-open closet. "Yeah, sure."

Nick laughed.

"You're okay, Ferro, able to clown it up at a time like this."

Ferro rumbled up a laugh. He gestured toward the overnight case.

"Well, we gonna be going now with that?"

Nick glanced toward the bathroom.

"Not we. You. I'd better stay with Marta a while longer, see she's all right."

Ferro flickered a grin and nodded.

Before handing the case to Ferro, Nick opened it. On top of the cash were slips of paper bearing Swiss bank account numbers and cautiously acknowledging three millions on deposit. Nick counted the cash. Three hundred grand exactly. He closed the case, handed it to Ferro, and saw Ferro to the door.

Ferro took a chance the trunk wouldn't spring open. He saw Nick gazing after the car as he drove slowly away, then Nick turned inside and closed the door.

The tan Band-Aid twisted as Marta pulled the blanket and top sheet back down over the mattress and smoothed them. She was in her slip. With a side-glance at Nick as he came back in, she sat on the edge of the bed and took off her stockings. She started to lie down, then jumped up and went to the dresser.

"Think I'll leave something for Ferro."

She took a wad out of her purse and shoved a dozen C-notes in a motel stationery envelope. She looked at Nick.

"What're you smiling at? Don't you think I should?"

"Go ahead. But it won't make all that much difference in Ferro's life."

"Money always makes a difference." She tongued the part that

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would come under the envelope flap, then pressed the flap to the wet arc. "Can't stand the gum taste, no matter how they flavor it." She propped the envelope up against her purse. "I'll leave this here and when you go you can take it for Ferro." She went back to the bed and fell onto it. "Boy, am I glad that was a holdup man."

"Glad?"

"I thought he was from The Boys. They never give up."

"From The Boys?"

"Cosa Nostra. Funny how I keep forgetting you're one of them. Cosa Vostra. They've been trying ever since I threw the party. You must've heard about that."

"I heard something about it. But I never knew if it was true."

"Boy, was it true. I got all these capos together for a real banquet. The best of everything. Champagne enough to fill a pool. Did that Renzo Corvino make a pig of himself."

"He was there?"

"And his brother Nunzio. And Nappy Mottola—funny about him. And Charley Leggate and Fausto and Guido and Pezzo." An eye looked at him archly. "And a few more of the elite. And then when they were all nice and full I got up like I was going to give a toast. And I told each one to his face in front of all the others what a prick he was. I told them I knew they were beginning to think I knew too much. And I told them I took out insurance. I told them I wrote down the names and dates and amounts of every payoff I made and I let them know it was all in a safe-deposit box. And then I told them to kiss my ass." She laughed. "You know that Charley Leggate looked like he was going to get down on his knees and do it, till he saw the others knew I just meant it—how did I mean it?"

"Metaphorically."

"I knew you'd know."

"And so you thought this guy just now was really after the key."

"Yeah. As if I'd be dumb enough to carry it with me." She laughed. "You know the New Orleans vault job?"

He nodded.

"Well, that was Charley. Just for the hell of it, I let his boys see me go in and out of the vault. And so they spent a long Labor Day weekend using blowtorches, power drills, and arc welders to break into the vault and rifle the safe-deposit boxes. All I had in my box was a note saying 'Sorry, Charley, this isn't the one.' I wish I could've seen his face when they brought him what was in my box: poor Charley."

Nick laughed.

"I'd like to've seen that too."

Marta lifted her head as if to see how well his eyes matched his laugh. She smiled and fell back with a big sigh.

"God, that shooting really shook me up. I feel like a stomach pump left me nothing but a shell."

Nick knew now that the other thing he had heard about her was

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true too. When Nutsy Shapiro fell to bullets, she had taken an overdose of sleeping pills and a stomach pump had brought her back.

He shook his head.

"What you are is all tense. What you need is to be all shook up."

He had seen there was a Magic Fingers. He put a quarter in. The bed shook. Marta sat up, then laughed and lay back.

"That feels good."

Nick stood watching. A faint smile shaped.

The Magic Fingers fell still. He sat down on the edge of the bed. Marta looked up at him. Her eyes were sleepy. She touched his face. Her fingertips brushed his lips lightly, bringing lovely pain. He gave the pain back to her, his lips bruising her mouth. He didn't put another quarter in. The bed shook.

Nick stiffened.

"Did you hear something?"

"What?"

"A small sound, like a cat."

She listened.

"No. In hunger or in heat?"

"I don't know. More like in pain."

She ran her fingernails along his back.

"I tried keeping a cat. But aside from being on the move so much, I had to put it away because it woke me too early. I explained about daylight saving, but it still woke me an hour early."

"One woman's Persian."

"No, it was a little old downhome tortoise-shell."

She scratched again.

Both heard the phone. Marta reached out and answered.

"Guessing games? Sure I know the voice. You were just here." She mouthed "Ferro" at Nick. "Your friend?" She raised an eyebrow at Nick. He hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, he's here. Hold on, I'll call him."

Nick took the phone and waited a half minute.

"Hello."

Ferro's voice. "Took a chance you might still be there. I made the delivery. You can hear for yourself."

Ledyard's voice. "Like your friend with the nose say, he made the delivery. Thanks for the war chest. So long, Whitey."

Nick held the dead connection. War chest. Ledyard had let him down. An idealist after all. Maybe not negritude but nationalism was what went deep. Well, if Nick's nationalism hadn't bought long-term peace, it had bought a fool-the-eye of retaliation and a piece of time. Ledyard likely meant to honor the six months. As the judge said, encouraging the man he sentenced to ninety-nine years, "Do as much of it as you can." Nick smiled. He wasn't about to explain to that cat about mankind-saving time. Room for just so many.

Marta stirred and he passed her the phone to hang up. He saw the

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droop of her breasts and the stretch marks on her belly. He felt jealous that she had lived so fully before he met her. He felt a tightening in his belly. She would live so briefly after he parted from her.

She elbowed herself up in bed.

"You're tense. My turn to put a quarter in."

Her body heat, her woman smell. But he shook his head. She leaned closer, her breath moist.

"You don't have to tell me, but there's something on your mind. On all your minds. I felt it in Ferro too. And the guy in Las Vegas I picked up the package from. All along the line. Something's up." She laughed. "I see you'd rather have me talk about myself. About the living legend. Like to hear about that?" She laughed again. "Silence gives consent, but it's hardly flattering."

Nick stroked her and she shivered.

"Purr. The real name's Maryjane McGluke. Ten other little McGlukes. Maybe that's why Pa took off when I was fourteen. Or maybe because I was fourteen. By then I had the same size bust I have now. He was beginning to look at me that way. Anyhow, he and Ma had fights and he lit out. I went to live with Grandma McGluke. What an old gal. Still hoeing cotton till eighty-six, when she took to her rocking chair. She died at ninety-four. I cut out when I was sweet sixteen but I'm glad I was able to stop by in my travels during her last few years and see she didn't want for anything. By then I had taken up with Nathan—nobody called him Nutsy to his face, not that I ever wanted to except a couple times when he made me mad—and got to know The Boys and do favors for them and had all the money I could spend."

The sun no longer sliced down through the lapped slats of the blinds. Darkness grew in the room.

"Then Nathan died. And I was kind of at loose ends till Vince got this notion of making me a star. I guess I'm just too lazy. Then Vince went on vacation. The story of my life."

Measuring the sun's life-span by its own beat of rise and set, Easter Sunday was only eleven days off. Nick switched on the headboard lamp.

Marta made a face. She crossed a forearm over her eyes.

"The story of my life. I sure know how to pick 'em, guys who break a mood."

"Like to find out what it's like to make love in zero gravity?"

"Sure."

"I mean it. Meet me in Miami next week . . . Well, will you?"

She swung her forearm away. Her eyebrows peaked.

"You don't have to get nasal with me." She smiled. "Yes."

"Fine. If you said no that would be the end of it for you."

"My, my. For me?"

"Now it's the beginning for both

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of us. I figure Tony and the rest owe me that."

"What do they have to do with us?"

"Don't get sore. Listen."

When he finished telling her, her eyes were wide open but their look shut him out.

"Are you sure, Nick? Are you sure sure?"

"I'm sure sure sure."

She flung herself on him and her eyes swallowed him.

"Can I trust you, Nick?"

"That's a laugh, after I just spilled the works to you."

"No, I mean I'll be putting more than my life in your hands."

"What the hell could be more than your life?"

"All right. I have a boy. He's only nine."

"Nutsy the father?"

"Yes. I kept him a secret so the Mob wouldn't have leverage over me. He's away at a military school. The best. Nick, I want you to save him even if it means you can't take me."

Nick had his answer ready but held it up a moment to earn more gratitude.

"I'll get you both aboard."

"Oh, Nick."

"Now wait, listen. Before the end of this week you take the kid out of school and bring him down to the Victory Beach Motel. Got that? I'll fix it so you have a cottage to yourselves."

"I don't care if it's an outhouse. You're sure there'll be room on the spaceship for Nathaniel and me?"

"I'm sure sure." He smiled to himself thinking of the Corvinos. "There'll be lots of room."

Jay Factor was stiff. He didn't know if he could move his arms and legs, he had held them still so long. And the temple wound, even though the blood had crusted under the handkerchief bandage, kept throbbing blindingly so that he didn't know if he could see to move.

Long after he had told himself it was safe to move he moved. He crawled out of hiding, holding his breath to hear the sounds of their sleep and the scraping and rustling of his progress.

He inched himself upward at the dresser. He had his hand on the envelope the woman Marta had set aside for the man Ferro, who must be the one who had shot him. But if he took the envelope, it would give away that he had been here all along and had heard what the man Nick had said.

What the man Nick had said had left his thinking number than his feeling, but he knew to draw his hand back from the heatless fire of the envelope. He stole to the door. He opened it slowly and let himself out. He shut it slowly, holding the knob and turning it so that the spring bolt would slip into place silently.

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H-DAY MINUS 10

NICK CAME AWAKE. MARTA was leaning on an elbow watching him. She smiled.

"Hey, Scarface. Yes, you. Who else? You got a pillow crease."

"You have a few battle scars yourself."

"Nothing dress and make-up won't hide. You hungry? I'm starving. What do you want for breakfast?"

"Adam and Eve on a raft."

The first thing the maid saw was that last night's Unit 6 had left her a ten-dollar tip. So she only grinned when she found the bloody sheet bunched up under the bed. Sure, they could at least've rinsed the thing in cold water. Now the blood had set. But that was the laundry service's worry. She was sorry she hadn't gotten a look at last night's Unit 6. Hardly ever came across a real virgin these days.

Don Vincenzo Podesta took out some of his fierce anger in his stride. He was tired of the pen. The hell with looking forward to his transfer to a hospital. Make the government commute his sentence. He had got word out to Tony to start a wave of dock strikes and defense slowdowns and transportation tie-ups. But so far there was no sign his people were crippling the economy. He had got word out to Tony to send that Taglione kid down for a ride around the pen because he had orders to give in detail. But either Tony never sent that Taglione kid or the radio thing in his jaw had gone dead. There was only a terrible silence from outside.

He strode to his boccie court. Flip and Mooch, the two inmates who most looked out for him and almost forced his needs on him before his needs formed, sweated to keep up with him.

Benny was sweeping the hard dirt smooth. It was only right that Benny, seeing him coming, should want to show him how much arm and back went into the job. See what a good sweeper: but the bristles of the broom snapped a spray of dirt. Benny stood too frozen to make a stab at brushing Don Vincenzo off.

Don Vincenzo looked down at the dust on his tailored pants and polished shoes. His voice was soft.

"Yes: why don't somebody tell him to be more careful."

Smoothly Mooch moved around behind Benny to block him off from escape and from the eyes of the screw, and Flip kneed Benny in the balls. Benny had made no move to run and the screw had looked away to keep his eyes empty and his nose clean.

"A beautiful guy," the screw told his relief as they watched Vince give the wooden boccie ball an underhand throw. "Not a bit of meanness in him. He's let it all out on the world."

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There were times, looking at Vince, when the screw began to believe that the walls didn't wall Vince in. As in a staircase illusion, there was a perception jump and the walls imprisoned all the rest of the world.

Don Vince's mind wasn't on his playing, but at the end of the game he found he had won as usual.

Ferro, on the flying bridge, held the *Figaro* in a lazy circle out on Long Island Sound off New Rochelle, the sun shadow-boxing the compass.

Tony Chestnut lay on deck aft soaking up sun, the tight coils of steel hair upward of his slacks storing energy. Nick Tallant spoke to narrowed eyes. Tony nodded.

"Okay, if you're sure the Negroes will play ball till we pull out, that's all that counts. Now let's see that passenger list. Wanna be careful about overbooking." He smiled. "Don't wanna have to pay denied-space compensation."

Nick was slow in handing over the list. Tony grabbed it from him. Nick swallowed.

"Goombah."

"Yeah?"

"Before you look down there at the end. We have to think ahead. About future generations. If we stick to one stock, the Mediterranean—that's us, inbreeding is going to bring out our bad traits."

"Like what? What's wrong with the Mediterranean?"

"Like anemia, maybe. Babies might have things wrong with the blood, the mind, the body, the senses. We'd never know till it was too late."

"Fact? So let's see who you put down here at the end. The Bugles? I already said that was okay. Oh, I see. Marta Vallejo. And who's this Nathaniel McGluke?"

"Her kid."

"Jeez, I didn't know she had a kid." Tony smiled. "Well sure. You tell her where to go to be on hand."

"Okay, goombah."

"Now let me take it from the top."

Nick watched Tony run a blunt finger down the names. The finger stopped at the name Anthony Castagna, Jr. Tony's face grew the color of red wine.

"Sonny. It's his fault Rose croaked. Scratch him."

"Goombah."

"I said scratch him."

"Yes, goombah."

The finger moved on. It halted at the name Johnny Vecchio, marked time, then marched along, with no more halts to the end.

"Okay, Nick, that's it then."

"Goombah."

"Yeah?"

"How about scratching the guys who croaked your sister's husband."

"The Corvinos."

"Yes."

Tony thought, then shook his head.

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"A little late for that now. We need the Corvinos' fighting strength."

Nick was slow in taking the list back. Tony shoved it at him.

Benny slipped a curious ring on his finger. A newspaper hook. Newstand operators used the small, sharp hooks on the ring to cut the heavy cord on bundles the newspaper delivery trucks dumped. Benny curved the finger out of sight and waited for Don Vince.

Both worked in the penitentiary textile mill, Benny at a machine sewing canvas mail bags, Don Vince wheeling the bags from one place to another. Benny waited in the narrow space by the transformer where it would be hard for Don Vince to duck or dodge.

And when Don Vince came to pass through, Benny drew his ring finger across Don Vince's face to rip out an eyeball. Benny smiled in his sleep. Even a guy who had taken a fall for transporting hot cars across state lines might dream harm to a Mafia big shot. Only thing, at the last minute Don Vince's head turned into a boccie ball.

H-DAY MINUS 9

TONY CHESTNUT, ABOARD THE *Figaro* heading south along the coast at top speed, looked through the paper Ferro had picked up at the Atlantic City dock where they stopped to refuel and take Don Fausto aboard. A news item with a New York dateline struck him funny.

HIJACKERS
PROVE DUDS

—New York (AP)—Eight armed men . . .

"Sounds like octopuses."

. . . wearing stocking masks took over a Penn Central Railroad yard in the Bronx today, locked up 16 employes, then spent a half hour picking out four trailer loads of whiskey and kosher meat worth $250,000.

The hijackers drove a station wagon into the sprawling yard at 165th St. and Sedgwick Av., across the Major Deegan Hwy. from the Highbridge police station, about 2 a.m. They piled, out of the station wagon and waved pistols, police said.

They rounded up the employes working in the yard and were familiar enough with its routine to know that one of them was missing. There are usually 17 men working the post-midnight shift in the yard, police said.

The hijacker who seemed to be in charge asked, "Where's the other guy?" The shift foreman answered that the 17th man had called in to say that his car wouldn't start and he'd be an hour late.

The hijackers locked the 16 employes in an empty trailer and then drove around the yard

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breaking open 40 loaded trailers before picking the trucks they wanted to drive off with.

At this point the 17th employe—police are withholding his name to protect him from underworld retaliation—made his tardy arrival. He had got a lift to a crossing several blocks away and walked the rest of the distance to the yard, police said.

On entering the yard, he quickly saw what was going on. With amazing presence of mind he kept to the shadows and followed the hijack team as the masked men chalked three trailers, each loaded with 1100 cases of whiskey, and a fourth full of meat. Picking up a piece of chalk that broke off, he daringly erased the marks the hijackers had made and put chalk marks on four loads of army uniforms.

He hid under a tractor-trailer until the hijackers had pulled out with their delusive loot. Then he went to the police station across the highway and returned in a patrol car. He and the police with him heard the shouts of the locked up employes and let them out.

It is understood that a grateful insurance company is rewarding the 17th man and he is starting on a two-week vacation. He could use one, police said, as he appeared to be suffering a delayed reaction.

Tony tossed the paper down the companionway and called to one of the men sharing the cabin and seasickness with Don Fausto.

"Here, seventeenth man. You, Coccodrillo, read about yourself."

H-DAY MINUS 2

TONY'S FIELD HEADQUARTERS was a trailer-office at a construction site near Cocoa on US 1, on the mainland fifteen crow's miles from where Cape Kennedy Space Center stood on the reef. Tony stepped out to look at contrails in a blueprint sky. He listened anxiously to the radio weather report that was saying more of the same, maybe.

Laughter. He glared at the shed where it came from. That was the detail of girls to keep the buildings department inspector and the county surveyor happy and unnosy about strange goings on at the site. If the holes failed, the detail had a backup guy with a gun.

Tony stepped back in. He stared at Ferro till Ferro shifted uneasily, then he saw Ferro.

"Try the hot line again."

Ferro picked up the red phone. It went straight to the Lieutenant Governor of Florida, who was presiding in the Governor's absence. When a voice answered, Ferro said, "Just testing," and hung up. He looked at Tony.

"He don't seem happy, all these calls and not knowing what it's all about."

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"For what we been paying him we got a license to steal the state, to cut off the whole penis-insula and shove it into Cuba. That's all he has to know."

"Yeah."

A car pulled up in a cloud of its own making and let Don Fausto out. He climbed into the trailer-office.

"It's okay, Tony. We got the homes of all them key technicians staked out. We can move any time you give the word."

Tony looked out at the sky. He rubbed an eye.

"Okay, Fausto. I'll let our people know everybody's going better get their ass down here." He swung around and picked up a phone. "Wire service? We do Our Thing. Got that? We do Our Thing."

He hung up. He went out, making for the Quonset hut at the far end of the site. Don Fausto fell in step beside him.

Inside the Quonset hut two dozen women sat under letters of the alphabet at a long table sewing name patches and black-C-on-yellow ground shoulder patches on army uniforms. Young boys and girls moved back and forth hanging completely processed uniforms alphabetically on pipe racks while others opened crates and matched uniforms to names and sizes on a list and brought them to the women sewing.

The man supervising the whole operation hurried over to get Tony's uniform off the rack and began fitting it to him.

Tony rubbed his eye.

"That cowboy wheelman of yours, Fausto. I got some dust in my eye. Somebody here see if you can find me a eye patch."

The same hoarse voice came over the loudspeakers in a thousand wire-rooms.

"Results of the last race at Cooperville. Vesuvio first by a nose, Lachryma Christi second, Est! Est! Est! third."

The wire-room regulars in the front room did double-takes and asked each other "The last race at where?" and scratched their heads over the scratch sheets. But wherever it was, it was something they hadn't kept track of and hadn't got down on, and they quickly forgot it.

In most of the thousand back rooms the man in charge of the big book lifted his head at the name Cooperville and listened hard.

He and maybe one of the men and women at the adding machines and the phones, a close relative, rose and went out.

The others looked at each other and maybe one spoke.

"If he got a tip there's a raid on, he would've said. I don't know what it is and I don't want to know. But whatever it is, they're off and running."

Nick's mother looked him over sharply, then turned her cheek to

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his kiss. She gazed at him with a funny smile while he told her to pack a few things and why.

"Don't you understand, mama?"

"I understand, Niccolo. If you want to give me a Florida trip, you don't have to go through all that." She gave his arm a hard slap. "But you look like the one needs some sunshine."

"Don't worry, mama, I'll be going too. Just be ready and I'll pick you up tomorrow afternoon and take you to the company plane."

He left angry that she was still smiling.

Packo Ledyard showed the pale of his hand.

"How."

Nick set the heavy suitcase down.

"Hello, Packo."

"Take your time. Some of the brothers see that your taxi wait. Now, what's this favor you want?"

"Here's a million cash in front. Tomorrow's TWA Flight 114 from L.A. to Miami—I want it to be L.A. to Havana instead."

"Hmmm."

"I know it's short notice."

"It ain't that. I'm just studying who. We got a couple brothers in L.A. be happy to jump bail."

"Then it's all set?"

"All takes in a lot of territory. It's as set as anything can be."

"That's all I want to know."

In the taxi Nick looked past the stiffly silent hackie at an urban renewal site. The wrecking boom swung the one-ton ball at a cornice. The ball caught a flash of light, then veiled itself in dust. A black dwarf sun lost in the Milky Way.

H-DAY MINUS 1

NICK GAVE THANKS THAT THE plane was too packed for anyone to move around and talk to everyone. He sat beside Buglewicz and they talked and not-talked together. His mother, her smile gone, sat back of them with the rest—Clara and her parents, Tommy Dee's and Wingy Podesta's widows and kids, and a few more, including his secretary, a cousin.

The sound of the plane was like a common heartbeat, and for the most part they listened to it in silence. Even the youngest kid behaved itself without need of a strong arm.

But the silence just behind him got on Nick's nerves. He half stood and twisted around.

"Still mad? Listen, mama, even if we had room for Father Noto and we told him and he wanted to come, he's too old. In time—and in space—we'll frock our own priests."

He waited but she remained unsmiling. He sat back down. Buglewicz smiled and nodded.

"And we'll canonize our own saints and raise up our own devils. It'll be interesting to see into which category you and I fall."

Jay Factor fingered his temple,

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the half-steeple probing gently. His head wound seemed to be healing well. But on the inside his mind rang with unceasing changes of alarm.

Passing as a Cuban refugee with small English, in his one week here he had served as pearl diver, busboy, and bellhop at the Victoria Beach Motel and Restaurant. The Victoria was suddenly full up and short of help. He had got this far but was no nearer finding a way to slip aboard a rocket.

Rocket. Starship. He could almost bring himself to believe it all a cracked-head dream. No, there was the woman Marta Vallejo.

Had that been the day before yesterday? Yes. He had to answer when her cottage called for service. Though he tried to stiffen himself against it by telling himself she had seen only the handkerchief mask, he couldn't keep from starting. But her glance passed over him incuriously. Her boy was still in his winter uniform, and she wanted the bellhop to take the boy's wrinkled suntans for quick pressing.

So it was not a dream. Real time was whizzing away from under his feet.

The manager's sharp voice reminded him it was time to take the dinner to Unit 9.

Usually when he knocked at the door of Unit 9, a voice said to leave the tray outside. This time the voice said to come in.

The man belonging to the voice stood before the dresser mirror unwinding what looked like a mile of bandage that wrapped his face and head.

"Oh, I thought you was—Okay, you might as well set it down over there."

As Jay Factor bent, setting the tray down, he saw the butt of a gun sticking out from under the pillow. Their eyes met in the mirror. The man moved toward the bed.

Without thinking, Jay Factor grabbed the flying loose end of the bandage. He hauled on it quickly. The man's head twisted around. The man's body twisted following but not fast enough. The man tripped over himself and fell hard.

Jay Factor himself almost tripped over the man in his hurry to get the gun. But he caught himself in time, got the gun, turned it around, and tapped the man on the head just as the man struggled to his knees. The man went down and stayed down.

He gave the man another tap for safety. He tore a sheet in strips, gagged the man, and spread-eagled the man under and to the bed too taut to tug or kick when he came to.

Jay Factor emptied the dinner into the toilet bowl, took the unit key from the inside of the door, hung the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the outside, locked the door, carried the tray and empty dishes back to the kitchen, and went to the manager's office.

"No feel good."

He touched his head and belly to

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show where he no felt good.

The manager made a face.

"Okay, Juan, take the rest of the day off. Just today, savvy? Be ready to put in a full day tomorrow or don't bother coming back, savvy?"

"Gracias, señora."

He walked up the road as far as the drug store, bought a few things, and sneaked back. He returned to Unit 9 and let himself in.

He made sure the man was still in and still out. He checked the knots. He took off the gag long enough to pour a glass of water and four sleeping tablets down the man's throat.

He searched through pockets, suitcase, and drawers but found no papers, no name. He changed into the slacks and a sports shirt he found in the closet, stuck the gun in his waistband, then shaved off his mustache. He broke open a roll of bandage and began to wind it around his face and head.

A knock.

He tried to remember the man's tone and match it.

"Come in."

He stared at the squat man who came in. He wondered who this was, what to say. The man laughed awkwardly.

"Yeah, it's me. Fausto. I guess I put on a little weight since the last favor you done me in Detroit."

Jay Factor nodded. Fausto smiled.

"Taking it off at last, huh? Go right ahead. Like to see just how much they changed your face."

Jay Factor slowly unwound the bandage. Fausto chuckled.

"I bet you're sore it was all unnecessary. Too bad you learned too late you'd be leaving U.S. jurisdiction for good."

The last of the bandage fell away.

"Jeez, you sure don't look like Johnny Vecchio."

Jay Factor's hand went convulsively to the gun in his waistband. Fausto stood very still.

"But I recognize the Johnny Vecchio style all right."

Jay Factor let the sports shirt drape over the gun again. Fausto looked at the naked face and shook his head.

"Jeez, you'd never know except for that scar along your temple, and I guess that will go. Listen, what I come for. I brung you your ticket."

His hand reached slowly into his pocket and came out slowly with a pasteboard. Jay Factor took it. It said:

T40, S101, Johnny Vecchio.

Don Fausto looked around.

"You mind?" He moved to look in the bathroom and the closet. "Okay. Listen, what I really come for. I'm beginning to think Tony Chestnut's getting too bigheaded. If the time comes for a showdown, I'd like you to line up with me and mine. You see how far down Tony put you? The last takeoff and one of the last seats? Think about it."

He nodded and left.

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H-DAY

0300 HOURS.

A knock. Jay Factor had dozed off without undressing. He sprang awake, opened the door. A man in bus driver's uniform stared at him. "Uh, can I see your ticket?"

Jay Factor flashed it. The man grinned.

"Okay, Johnny. You ride in the lead bus with me. Remember, any cops look twice at us and try to stop us, you let 'em have it."

Jay Factor stood still for a moment, then stepped out. The bus driver stared again.

"Ain't you taking nothing? Remember, we ain't coming back here."

Jay Factor stepped back in, got Johnny Vecchio's suitcase, locked the door, and hung the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the knob. He followed the driver through neon and shadow to the highway. A line of buses stood waiting, most already half full of passengers.

He sat just behind the driver in the lead bus, and the caravan set out. It stopped to pick up the rest of the detail at motels along the way. As the buses tooled along, hostesses passed out wigs, sideburns, and beards to the men, glowing paint and rainbow feathers to the women, and love beads to all.

They met no cops to look twice at them. The buses pulled up at the gates of the launch complex. The passengers got out, took signs from the station wagon that had brought up the rear, and began their protest vigil.

The guards looked at the protesters and read the signs—"DOWN WITH THE MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX, UP WITH THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX!" "$PEND MORE ON OUR INNER CITIE$, LE$$ ON OUTER $PACE!" The guards scowled, smiled, shrugged. 4,000 nuts.

0115 HOURS

The trailer-office field head quarters of Tony Chestnut blazed with light. Tony, in uniform with unit-citation fourragere and four stars, stood in the doorway. His shadow marched toward the Quonset hut, and he watched one-eyed as the soldiers came out in full battle-dress and climbed aboard buses.

Behind him Ferro took a phone call, grunted, hung up.

"Okay, chief."

Tony swung around, strode to the desk. He picked up the red phone. He drew the scenario nearer and stared at it.

A sleepy voice answered, asking.

"Yeah, it's me, Governor. Sorry about waking you, but this won't wait. It's just what I been afraid of. I got a tip there's a commie plot to wreck the Space Center. The first phase should be in operation—excuse me, I'm reading from the wrong place. What I mean to say is, you better check with the security officer at the Space Center and see

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if there ain't a menacing mob gathering at the gate."

There came sounds of the Lieutenant Governor collecting himself.

"Well, I surely thank you for your patriotic concern, Mr. Castagna, and I surely will get on this right quick."

"You do that. You might want to put the Armory on stand-by for mobilization. Be ready to move fast if you have to move. You might have to call up units of the National Guard to maintain law and order."

"You know, Mr. Castagna, I think the first thing I'll do is put the Armory on stand-by."

"Good idea."

Tony hung up. He picked up a flashlight, went to the doorway, and swung the beam in a wide arc.

The buses full of men in uniform pulled out.

0145 HOURS.

The Armory crew opened the doors to the uniformed men piling out of the buses. Then one of them said it for all.

"Hey, those ain't our guys."

But it was too late. Mafiosi pistols covered them and Mafiosi hands tied them up.

Those Mafiosi who had served in the armed forces and knew how to drive tanks warmed them up while the others loaded up with riot guns, grenade launchers, grenades, chemical mace, mortars, and shells. Abandoning the buses, they rumbled out in tanks and armored personnel carriers mounting machine guns and towing antiaircraft guns.

They made for the Space Center.

0230 HOURS.

A mosquito fleet of pleasure craft, including the *Figaro,* and of barges, tankers, and dredges, rendezvoused off the Cape. They carried a thousand Mafiosi, mostly Mustache Petes, grouchy about not being in on the real action.

Radar picked them up. Crash boats darted out from shore to keep clear the 5-statute-miles danger area lying seaward of the Cape.

The mosquito fleet machine-gunned through the arc of crash boats. The Mustache Petes began to feel better. This was like the old days of rumrunning.

0240 HOURS.

As the column of tanks and armored personnel carriers rumbled up, the security force at the guard gate all turned out to stare at the show of strengh.

The protesters too bunched up and sent up a cheer, but some among them quickly put it down and prompted them to send up an ugly roar.

Don Tito, now a bird colonel, hopped out of his command car and strode to the gate.

"How bad is the situation, men?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle, sir. Surprised the Governor thought he had to send you out for"—a wave of the hand—"this."

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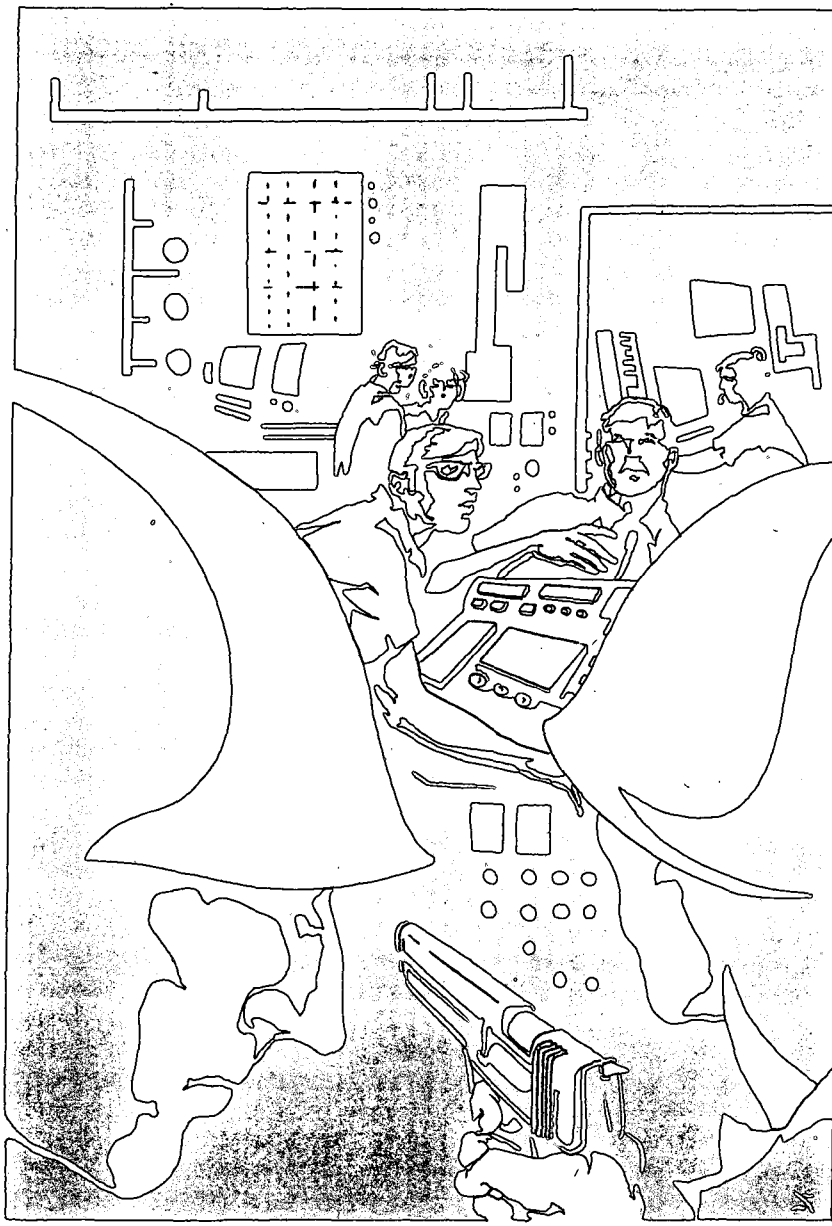

ALICIA AUSTIN

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"Maybe he knows more than we do. Anyway, it's not for us to reason why."

"Yes, sir."

"Now if you'll step aside and let us through—"

"But, sir—"

A squad in gas masks moved in and sprayed chemical mace and ended that protest. Don Tito gave a sweep of his arm. The column rumbled through the gate.

The picketers started to drop their signs and surge through in the column's wake. Don Tito gave the air a push of his hand.

"As you were. You're why the National Guard is here, remember?"

Those who had dropped their signs picked them up, and all went back to their protest vigil. Don Tito glanced around to see that his men were getting the security force out of sight and that a detail was standing guard in its place. He looked at his watch, he looked at the paling sky.

On the dot two dozen dots appeared and grew to helicopters. They skimmed over the barbed wire and landed inside the cyclone fence. Each bore on its sides grommeted squares of cloth that blazoned a black letter C on a yellow ground.

The helicopters filled with soldiers and lifted. Don Tito in the lead copter looked back. Tanks and personnel carriers towing antiaircraft guns were fanning out along the perimeter. It was good they hadn't had to punch through the fence. Everything looked nice and normal.

0250 HOURS.

Don Pezzo, in command of taking and holding the beachhead, gazed inland through night glasses He could see helicopters set down on and around the Launch Control Center and the Vehicle Assembly Building. Now he could believe the VAB was the world's largest structure—the helicopters looked like fleas on an elephant. He waited for sound to carry but heard no heavy shooting. Surprise was the thing all right.

He turned. All up and down the shore the mosquito fleet had docked and beached. The Mustache Petes were digging in, emplacing machine guns. Don Pezzo slung his automatic rifle over his shoulder. He got into a jeep they had just unloaded on the dock, called Macalucci to drive him, and rode up and down the shore to see that they were digging in right.

He had Macalucci stop so he could watch the mess detail lower the ramp of a beached barge and drive ashore jeeps pulling U-Haul trailer loads of field rations—catered veal parmigiano dinners and splits of Asti Spumante keeping hot and cold in plastic chests. The salt wind spiced his hunger. Macalucci's too. Macalucci turned to him.

"Chow."

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"Ciao. Drive, Drive."

0300 HOURS.

Don Tito was with the platoon that burst into the Firing Room of the Launch Control Center. The platoon quickly spread out, its weapons covering the hundreds of engineers, technicians, and specialists. All personnel froze at their monitors and consoles. Don Tito strode to the foremost row of consoles. A man stood up slowly.

"What is this, Colonel?"

"You the launch director?"

"Yes. Colonel, there's a countdown in progress on a supply vehicle for the space platform."

"I know. The stuff on it isn't essential. Put a hold on it and switch to a countdown on Personnel Rocket 1. It'll begin loading up in ten minutes."

"I don't understand. I'll have to take this up with Houston."

"I guess you didn't notice some of those screens went blank."

The launch director whirled for a look.

"Houston!" He whirled back to Don Tito. "What happened?" What's going on?"

"It should be coming over the radio soon that something—a fire, an explosion—took out the Manned Spacecraft Center outside Houston. We're on our own here."

"One minute, Colonel. Let's see your authorization."

Don Tito pulled out and unfolded a legal-size sheet of paper. He handed it to the launch director.

"Here's my authorization." He lowered his voice and pointed to the top of the list of names. "Now let's keep it down. This is you. Get an outside line from my man in the communications center and dial your home phone. Then let the range-safety officer, the flight-dynamics officer, and the guidance officer call their homes. As far as you're concerned, we're holding your families hostage. As far as everybody else is concerned, we're just here to make sure there's no sabotage like at Houston."

When the key men had called home and found their families indeed in terror, Don Tito spoke soothingly.

"There's absolutely nothing to worry about so long as everything goes smooth. Like it's rough that the tractor taking Rocket 40 to its pad stalled when the driver saw us land. We ought to get it rolling again. We'll need a new driver. And we ought to start that countdown on Rocket 1."

0315 HOURS.

Marta smiled. Nathaniel looked real cute in his neat suntans. And the way he sat up so straight and so solemn, his eyes big against sleep.

"Nathaniel?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"We still have, oh, fifteen minutes. You might as well lie down a while."

"Yes, ma'am."

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He lay down on the roll-away bed but kept his eyes open.

Marta leaned back in her chair. The lightweight suitcase she had packed for both of them made a lousy footstool, but it was the best she had. Like what was in it. She had tried to think what to take, what to buy. So little seemed worth taking, worth spending her money on. For Nathaniel a platinum wristwatch that would tell time forever to the split of a second on its own power. The biggest flask of the most expensive perfume for herself. A few changes of underwear for each. Oh, and her best jewelry and a few pieces of junk jewelry that she liked just as much. A few dozen sheer stockings. And her usual travel kit for keeping clean and looking pretty. If there was anything else she ought to take, she couldn't think of it and it was too damn late anyway.

She heard a car pull up outside. She toed the suitcase away, set her flat-heeled shoes on the floor, and stood. She nodded to Nathaniel to rise. She was wearing a sweater and jeans and she smoothed herself. She twitched the curtain. Outdoor lighting showed a jeep with a long whip antenna. She smiled, seeing Ferro at the wheel, in uniform.

Nathaniel was two-handedly lugging the suitcase toward the door.

"No, honey, I'll take it. You hold the door open like a real gentleman."

But the door opened as she picked up the suitcase. Tony Chestnut walked in. She tried not to giggle or goggle.

"Hello, General. Or is it Field Marshal?"

"It's always Tony to you." He smiled. "You look like you're surprised to see me, Marta."

"Yes, I was expecting Nick."

"Well, I thought I'd stop by, myself."

"That's nice of you, Tony."

"Yeah. Say, you remember that big party you threw? I never forgot the things you called me."

The suitcase sagged to the floor.

"Listen, Tony—"

"I listened. And after you told us all off you said you fixed it so if anything funny happened to you the Feds would get a lot of names and dates and amounts."

"But that won't mean anything now."

"That's right. That's why something funny can happen to you now. So this is your kid."

"Yes. Nathaniel, you go and wait in the jeep."

"Nathaniel, huh? No, kid, you wait right here. You know something, Marta, I didn't make up my mind what I was gonna do till just now. For a long time I dreamed I cut you up, carved my initials in you. But I don't have to do that, do I?"

He lifted the eye patch. He drew his pearl-handled sidearm. He shot her kid and after she fell on the body he shot her.

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0330 HOURS.

The radio in the station wagon oozed pop. Nick hardly heard the words of the song: "I like this about you and I like that about you but what I like most about you is me."

He kept his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the unrolling road. Buglewicz beside him switched from station to station to catch some news.

"—late word about that missing plane with not one but two bands of hijackers aboard. Twelve hours ago the captain of Flight 114 from Los Angeles to Miami radioed that armed passengers were ordering him to change course and make for Havana's José Martí Airport. Almost immediately afterwards the pilot radioed that he was preparing to ditch. He reported that there had been a shoot-out between the hijackers and another group of armed passengers. This second group apparently wanted the plane to head somewhere else. The pilot's last words were that the plane wasn't heading anywhere—because in the exchange of shots the instrument panel and a wing tank suffered damage. After that, silence. Until just a few minutes ago when the authorities announced the sighting of rubber life rafts in the Caribbean. The coordinates are near those where Flight 114 was last heard from. According to the F.A.A., the plane that spotted the rafts says there are a number of survivors. Several ships only an hour away are speeding to pick them up. Just in, another bulletin from Houston. The blaze at the Manned Spacecraft Center is now under control, and a special N.A.S.A. board is investigating the cause. And now a word from—" A singing commercial for a filter-tip cigarette, in the squeaky voice of a mouse laughing at the small amount of coal tar in the cigarette.

Nick smiled. Renzo and Nunzio Corvino would be among the survivors in the life rafts. But they wouldn't be among those in the starship. They had missed the bus, the peacenik buses.

"In local news, Lieutenant Governor Hartline says he has been reassured by the security force at Kennedy Space Center that the peacenik demonstration outside the gate is under control, and it will not be necessary to invoke harsh measures at this time. But he says he will not hesi—"

Buglewicz flicked it off as Nick swung the station wagon off the highway.

"Not the Victoria, Tallant. The wife and kids are at the trailer camp further down. The Whispering Palms."

"I know. I'm making a pickup. Marta Vallejo. You've heard the name?"

"And seen the picture in the papers. Some pickup, as the average sensual man might say."

The motel was dark and deserted, all but the cottage Nick

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pulled up in front of. Light wedged the door open. Nick slid out when no shadow crossed the solid stillness.

"You wait here."

Nick ran to the door. He stopped. Then he stepped over a serpent of blood and bent over the bodies.

"Marta."

The kid was dead but there was still some life in her.

"Marta."

He held her tightly in his arms, but she was far away. He turned his head. Buglewicz bowed in the doorway, throwing up. He looked at Buglewicz.

"Tony did it."

Buglewicz straightened, sweating and shivering, and seemed to force himself to step nearer and stare down.

"Listen, Tallant—"

Nick lowered Marta gently.

"I know. There's nothing we can do for her. Let's go."

He stood up. Buglewicz moved aside and shook his head.

"You go."

It took Nick time to understand.

"You're not going? You crazy? What about your wife, your kids?"

"They're just whom I'm thinking about. I see that woman, that kid, and I see I have been crazy. I can't cage my wife and kids in with animals like Tony."

Nick began to talk to himself.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. The guy isn't crazy. He always chooses the lesser of two evils. Staying on earth and waiting for the sun to go nova can't be the lesser evil. So . . . so . . ."

"Now wait a minute, Tallant. I can be thinking of trying to get aboard the Establishment starship that will replace the one you're hijacking"

"Fat chance. They'll know you're the brains behind this hijack. I don't believe there's going to be another Establishment starship. I don't believe there ever was one. I don't believe the sun's going nova."

Nick stood quietly watching Buglewicz tug at a pocket and finally get out a gun.

"You want to know the true score? The real scenario? Here it is, Tallant. It's the wolf and the cattle. The wolf kept feeding on them, but those who stayed alive figured it was worth it if they could get on with their grazing. But the wolf grew bigger than a bull, and so did its appetite. So the cattle sent for the fox. The Establishment hired me to think up a way to get rid of the Mafia once and for all."

Nick nodded. Buglewicz smiled shakily.

"You see? It had to come to this. If the government put all the Mafiosi in concentration camps or deported them from Earth, the cry would be 'Totalitarianism!' If the government invited the Mafiosi to leave and provided the starship openly, the Mafiosi would laugh like hell and say 'No, thanks, you go.' The thing was to make them believe

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they were taking the initiative, that it was a matter of the survival of the fittest. The apple of knowledge has to be a stolen apple. So we gave Don Vincent the feeling something big was up."

"And that's where I came in."

"And myself. It was wild. The Feds tailing you rushed me ahead of you around town so it would seem you were bumping into me instead of the other way around. It was a relief when you finally grew aware of me and thought of seeking my advice."

Nick stirred. Buglewicz's fingers cocked around the grip of the gun. Nick stilled.

"That's right, Tallant. Then I fed you Sandsmark. The government in turn had been feeding him false data, knowing he was passing secrets to the Red Chinese anyway. And once I had you believing the sun was going nova, it would've looked funny to you if I didn't try to save myself and my family. But a strange thing happened.

"After I helped you catch up with me again I got to thinking. Why not take part in man's greatest adventure? Trade the world and its wonders for space and its splendors—and another world and its wonders. The devil tempted himself. The devil and Faust are one. The jerk and his fist. It turned into an ego-trip for me.

"Now I'm settling for a Pyrrhic victory. Why not let them go without you too, Tallant? If you stay, the government can't really touch you. The government's guilty of entrapment. You can start with a clean slate."

Nick moved too suddenly for the gun to follow. He bent to Marta. He shook her to bring her back a piece.

"Marta."

"Let her be, Tallant. She's too far gone."

Nick shook her again.

"Maryjane."

Her unseeing eyes rolled.

"Maryjane. In that safety-deposit box. You got the goods on the Corvinos?"

"Nunz . . . Renz . . . coupla dirty punks. Got plenty on . . . Corvin . . ." She laughed blood. "Shoulda figured." Her eyes focused. "Go to hell . . . lover boy."

She was too far away now ever to come back. Nick let her down gently. He rose. He was pale but he smiled.

"That takes care of the Corvinos."

He looked at his watch and moved forward.

"You're not making sense, Tallant."

"Out of my way."

Buglewicz stepped aside but held the gun on Nick.

"What are you going to do? It's too late to change anything."

Nick moved past Buglewicz and out the door. He slid behind the wheel of the station wagon. As he pulled away he heard Buglewicz call from behind the cottage door.

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"Well, good luck."

He kept his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the unrolling road. He saw he was about to whip past the Whispering Palms. He started to jam on the brake. Stop a few minutes and do a few things. He'd bet Buglewicz was suddenly worrying about that right now. But the echo of Buglewicz's "Well, good luck" rang in his skull, and he laughed and pressed harder on the gas. Besides, maybe Buglewicz had thought faster than him and had phoned ahead to warn the wife and kids.

He pulled into an auto graveyard just as a helicopter rose up out of its hidden center. He blew his horn and flashed his lights off and on and got out and waved and shouted. But the helicopter, with the yellow ground of its insignia rosy as it rose and caught the dawn, bore away dawnward to the Cape. Maybe he was a minute late. But they could have waited that minute. And it was hard to believe they hadn't spotted him.

He ran through the maze to see if there was another copter in the clearing in the jungle of wrecks and parts. There wasn't. He huffed up, then blew out. He hurried back to the station wagon and continued south to Cocoa.

0415 HOURS.

He looked at his watch and checked it against the dashboard clock. He'd never make the causeway in time. But he speeded on.

He let up when he saw a rosy-edged cloud rise over where the causeway would be. In a moment he heard a boom. He had to smile. Right on time.

The key personnel of the Launch Control Center's day shift would have reached the Cape. Now the demolition squads had blown the bridges behind them—had blasted all the causeways across Indian River, Mosquito Lagoon, and Banana River to cut the Cape off from the mainland.

Nick held south. Now US 1 was taking him farther from the Cape. But the longest way round was the shortest way home. At least that kind of thinking made sweet wine out of sour grapes.

0500 HOURS.

At Sebastian he turned left onto a dirt road leading to the bank of the Indian River. He abandoned the station wagon without bothering to switch off the headlights and walked along the bank till he came upon a nice-looking boat with a nice-looking outboard motor.

A guy who looked like a retired teacher was tinkering with the motor. He glanced up at Nick.

"Good morning."

"Good morning. I'd like to hire something like that."

The guy's face creased in a smile. He shook his head.

"You won't find anything much along here. What's good will all have gone out by now."

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Nick nodded at the motor.

"Having trouble?"

The guy looked sore at himself.

"I should have left well enough alone. But I took the fuel line off just to clean out a little dirt. Now it won't go at all. You happen to know anything about outboard motors?"

"A bit. That's an Evinrude. You reversed the fuel line. You have to put it with the bulb end at the tank, or it won't deliver any gas." He reached for the wrench. "Here, let me."

He spoke as he worked.

"This way. And you have to make sure you push the coupling on all the way. The catch has to engage the groove in the tank nipple—in here, and press down the vent pins. See?"

The guy leaned over to see.

Nick tapped him on the head.

"That's the way you do the job."

Nick loaded the boat with cans of gas. It was going to be a long haul. Across the Indian River to Sebastian Inlet, then through the inlet to the Atlantic, and on up the coast to the Cape. He took from his pocket a yellow handkerchief with the black letter C in the middle. He tied it to fly from the staff at the bow.

0545 HOURS.

Tony Chestnut had taken over from Don Tito in the Firing Room. He took the call from Don Guido, who was in the safety chamber below Rocket 1's gantry. The 125 commandos who would seize the space station and the starship were aboard the rocket and were go for launch.

Tony turned to speak to the launch director, then stopped.

"What's that?"

That, a screen showed, was an F-104 jet fighter from Patrick Air Force Base buzzing the complex. Tony turned to the range-safety officer.

"Tell Patrick to keep its planes the hell away."

When the range-safety officer failed to jump to it, Tony thrust out his jaw.

"Now hear this. Don't take too long thinking out what I tell you to do. We got what you call redundancy." He nodded to the others at the front row of consoles. "That goes for all of you. We got a whole backup team of you guys in the wings. Now you get rid of those planes and start lifting the birds off, one every fifteen minutes."

The range-safety officer called Patrick. Then he notified Miami Air Traffic Control Station of impending firings and asked MATC to divert all air traffic inland until further notice.

The metal blind raised. The slanted picture-window the length of the building filled with a vista of the rockets on their pads.

The launch director leaned into his mike.

"This is a hot count. Absolute discipline will be maintained on the intercom and within the area."

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A pole rose high above the building. A red blinker light at its top flashed. Air horns bellowed.

The peaceniks, who had ended their vigil, took shelter in the blockhouses and fought for eye space at the periscopes.

At the consoles red lights gave way to green.

"Verify all stages ready for power transfer."

Vapor boiled off. A thick sheathing of ice formed on the skin of the rocket.

"T minus three minutes ten seconds and counting."

The Mustache Petes in their foxholes made signs against bad luck.

"Initiate firing command and verify."

A button triggered the automatic sequencing system. The computer had taken over the countdown.

The 125 commandos, who had strapped themselves in their contoured couches, gripped the armrests.

Stinging sweat got into Tony's bare eye, and he lifted his eye patch to see.

"T minus ten seconds and counting . . . nine . . . ignition! We have ignition!"

Almost as one the Saturn engines flamed. Shock waves shivered the earth. Steel hold-down arms clamped the rocket to the pad while engine thrust built up. The thick sheathing of ice shook loose and crashed. Birds flew from their nests, rabbits, possums, armadillos, and raccoons took off through the scrub.

"Seven . . . six . . . five . . "

Forty-five miles south, churning up the coast, Nick heard the thunder, though not yet. He would hear it some four minutes later.

"Four . . . three . . . two . . ."

The steel hold-down arms released the rocket.

"Lift-off!"

The last of the umbilicals unplugged.

0620 HOURS.

After the second lift-off Tony Chestnut could not sit still for the rest. Till he knew the first rocket had taken the space station and the starship, the lack of feedback was more than he could stand.

To fill in the time he began to jeep around the Space Center to see for himself that the perimeter was secure and that there was no hitch in getting the right passengers aboard the right rockets.

And he found it was lucky he did. There was a fuss at Rocket 5. Don Charley Leggate was trying to pull rank on the soldier inspecting luggage at the foot of the gantry elevator. Don Charley poured sweat. The weight of the suitcase was tearing at his shoulder joint, but he didn't switch hands.

"Jeez, fella, don't you see this don't hardly weigh nothing?" He turned to follow the soldier's eyes. "Oh, hello, Tony. Say, tell this guy—"

"What you got in there, Charley?"

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"Just what we supposed to take."

"Open."

"Now, listen—"

"Snap shit."

Don Charley set the suitcase down so savagely it sprang open and spilled its contents. Don Charley carried a full line of holy medals, mostly St. Christopher's, ornate crucifixes, and beautifully framed saints' pictures.

"Now see what you done, Tony."

"Tell you what I'm gonna do. You can take one of each. Doing you a favor, Charley. The less you take the more they're worth. Law of supply and demand."

Don Charley's face cleared.

"Say, you got something there."

As Don Charley bent to make his pick, Tony was already glancing along the waiting line and fixing on a pregnant middle-aged man.

"What kind of a loose ship you running, Charley?"

He thumbed the man out of line and made him empty his money belt. Tony stared in disgust at the heap.

"Did you get the list of metals?"

"Well, yeah, but I—"

"But you couldn't get it through your skull this here stuff don't mean nothing no more. We got enough toilet paper aboard. Ferro, loan the guy your cigarette lighter."

A tear hissed on the ashes of $500 to $10,000 bills.

0650 HOURS.

A red-bellied woodpecker stacatoed Don Pezzo out of his doze. Don Pezzo's eyelids opened, oyster shells opening on scummy pearls. Don Pezzo couldn't find the woodpecker, so he scowled at Macalucci. Macalucci, wearing a sunburnt straw hat, was busy rubbing bullets with garlic. Don Pezzo had to nod approvingly.

He sighed, sat up, and broke the seal on a box of coronas. He helped himself, then after a slight hesitation, held out the box.

"Take."

Macalucci wavered.

"What's a matter, Macalucci? You think it gonna explode in you face? Take off like one a them rockets?"

"Not that. I'm give up smoke ten years on doctor's say-so." Macalucci reached quickly in and grabbed a handful. "What the hell now."

Don Pezzo produced a box of wooden matches. He lit up, then passed the box to Macalucci. Macalucci took off his hat to run the match head through his hair, remembered he had no hair, laughed, rubbed the match head along his nose to pick up a film of oil. He struck the match. It caught fire and burned well. He bit and spat, then lit and sucked. He sighed out a rich puff.

0740 HOURS.

The siren of a crash car lured Tony's jeep to Rocket 9. Ferro pulled up behind the crash car, and Tony saw a Family doctor, a guy he

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recognized as an ace abortionist, probing a woman. The doctor looked up at an angry Don Guido.

"It's the excitement bringing it on ahead of time. She'll give birth in maybe twenty minutes."

Don Guido waved a kind of marshal's baton at the line leading to the gantry elevator.

"Keep moving, keep moving." He turned back to the doctor. "We don't have twenty minutes. Use your knitting needle or we'll have to scratch the both of them."

The doctor sucked in his breath. He put his hand in his bag. Then there was a light in his eyes.

"I'd like to try giving her a shot. Put a hold on birth. It'd be the first baby born in space. Let me switch places with somebody and ride up with her."

Don Guido frowned.

"Keep moving, keep moving." He shook his head. "I don't know, doc. I'm going up in this one and I don't want a lot of yelling and screaming."

The radiotelephone in the jeep spoke. It was Don Tito in the Firing Room.

"We made it. The boys took the ship."

Tony let out a shout.

"You hear that, everybody? We made it. The boys took the ship."

Everybody let out a shout. Tony waved them down and spoke to Don Tito.

"Keep sending them up, Tito. Keep sending them up."

Still in a glow he looked around and saw the same tableau.

"What the hell, Guido. Do like the doc says."

Don Guido grimaced and tapped a guy to step aside. The doctor gave the woman a shot and got a couple of guys in line to pick her up and carry her to the elevator.

Tony's gaze fixed on Don Guido's marshal's baton. It was canvas Guido had rolled into a tube and fastened with rubber bands.

"What you got there, Guido?" Don Guido's face grew red. He made a gesture of nothing.

"Nobody's gonna take it away from you, Guido. Let's see it."

Don Guido worked the rubber bands off and unfurled the canvas, a baker's dozen of canvases.

"A job I had some guys pull—friends in Paris, France."

He peeled them one by one—the Mona Lisa and a dozen other familiar works, including a nice painting of the Madonna and Child.

0755 HOURS.

The hitch at Rocket 11 turned out to be two dozen empty seats. Some of the Corvino Family were no-shows. Tony moved Don Fausto and some of his Family up.

They shook hands at the foot of the gantry elevator. Don Fausto gave Tony a funny smile.

"You're like the captain and the ship, only the other way around. Ain't you worried they won't wait for you?"

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Tony laughed without smiling.

"You can't go nowhere without me. The soldiers who took the starship know I got the whatchacallit, astrogation tapes all scrambled up and I got the unscrambler in a safe place in Rocket 40. Just pray nothing happens to Rocket 40."

"Just kidding, Tony."

"Yeah. So long."

0830 HOURS.

But when Tony, still feeling high, returned to the Firing Room, he found the launch director arguing with Don Tito about Rocket 11 and Don Tito looking as if he was going to give in.

"Hold it, you two. What's the matter?"

The launch director pointed to a red light.

"There's a possible malfunction in the bird, and I want to put a hold on it."

One of the Mustache Petes, Al Dente, walked toward Don Pezzo and kicked up something. He held his Tommy gun out of the way on its sling and bent. He picked up a wedge shape and straightened slowly. He turned the thing in the spiral gear of his fingers.

"What the hell is this thing?"

Macalucci squinted through cigar smoke and the blur of time.

"Hey, that's a head of a arrow. Indians."

Al Dente looked around in alarm.

Macalucci laughed and choked.

"Not now, you testadura. That's from long time ago."

Al Dente swung his Tommy gun around. The barrel and his indignant nostrils glared at Macalucci.

"Who you call testadura?"

Don Pezzo took a last long drag on his corona and fico'd it away.

"Break it up, you guys."

Al Dente slowly pointed the barrel away from Macalucci. But he had to take his rage out on something. He fired a burst at the red-bellied woodpecker. The bird exploded.

"Now he's not red-bellied. He's red all over."

They laughed.

Tony looked at the red light as the launch director spoke.

"A sensor may be giving us bad information, but we can't take that chance."

Tony looked out at Rocket 11. He wanted to stick to the plan. It had worked out fine so far. But he didn't want Don Tito, who was due to board a rocket soon, to think Tony Chestnut would risk a rocketful of lives.

He had only a minute to make up his mind and he was making it up to tell the launch director to hold. A soldier ran in.

"There's shooting out by the sea."

Tony swung to the launch director.

"Launch." He swung to Don Tito. "We gotta stick to the plan. We can only hold them off so long.

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We gotta get each rocket out on time. We can't risk the lives of the rest of us."

Don Tito nodded. Tony swung to get on to Don Pezzo and find out how bad it was and what he needed.

By the time Tony found out, the rocket had lifted off. It rose out of the picture window, and Tony swung to a large chart that flashed on the wall above the front row of consoles. A yellow dot showed at the bottom of the chart. Slowly the dot rose, tracing the planned curve.

Seventy seconds into the flight. At 40,000 feet the rocket was reaching Max Q. In those seconds before breaking the sound barrier, upper-air turbulence would put maximum stress on the rocket's superstructure.

The yellow dot suddenly jiggled away from the planned curve.

"My God."

The boat rode a swell and Nick saw a flaming arrowhead hit the horizon due north. He looked at his watch and did some figuring. If they had been sticking to the plan, that was the rocket the Corvinos would have been on.

Macalucci was sore at Don Pezzo for the cursing out. He nudged Al Dente and whispered.

"There's you Indian."

He pointed his cigar at Don Pezzo, who had draped an Army blanket around himself.

Don Pezzo heard a whisper but didn't look around. His eyes gazed blankly toward where the broken rocket had fallen into the sea. He whispered to himself.

"I'm glad I don't go after all."

He wrapped the blanket more tightly about himself.

0935 HOURS.

Nick had seen the arcs of four perfect lift-offs follow the bad trip at fifteen-minute spaces and wipe it from his mind. Now he saw a stand of rockets and gantries on the headland. He swung the boat in toward the Cape.

It answered sluggishly. But he had had time to get used to it, time piled on time, since finding out once it took to the water that it was a long-shaft motor on a short-shaft transom. The extra drag had knocked about six miles off the speed and had really burned fuel.

He angled the boat to fly the Mafia flag plainly. This was not in the plan and the Mustache Petes would be trigger-happy. They had nothing to lose. He aimed for a space between beached boats. They thought they had nothing to lose.

Shooting-gallery figures popped up along the shore, but they were the ones with the guns. He untied his shoes; he might have to dive over the side. But strangely enough they held their fire and waited to make out his flag.

A guy in a blanket waved him in. Nick rode the boat ashore, then

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jumped off the bow. He squelched to the guy in the blanket.

"Take me to Don Pezzo."

"I'm Pezzo."

Nick looked. That was Don Pezzo under all that. He had smeared on some of all the camouflage creams he had found in his kit—Bark Brown, Glade Green, Shadow Black.

"You're the Taglione kid, hey? You didn't come out of that rocket wreck, did you?"

"Uh, no. I've just been kind of checking the perimeter."

"Oh."

Nick bent to tie his shoes, but air horns sounded across the palmetto flats. Don Pezzo grabbed his arm.

"Hurry."

Nick followed Don Pezzo into a slit trench. For the next few minutes he was too busy riding out the storm and shutting his eyes against sand to watch the lift-off. He got up and brushed himself off. No sense hanging around here. He got Don Pezzo to let Macalucci jeep him to the gantry of Rocket 40.

1010 HOURS.

Reports began coming in from the outposts. Tony Chestnut put them together to read that the Army and the Marines were moving in on the Space Center, bringing up heavy pieces.

"I don't think we have to worry about that. They don't wanna damage nothing. They'll see it's a standoff. You just look out for helicopters and paratroops. You see them, you blast them out of the sky."

1105 HOURS.

The enforcer loading them up for Rocket 22 kept the gantry elevator pumping people into the big nose of the rocket. A small nose poked out of a kid's jacket.

"Hold it, kid." The enforcer pulled the zipper down, lifted the pup out by the scruff, and set it four-splay on the ground. "You know you can't take pets."

"That's Duke."

"Move along, kid. You're holding up the line."

"If I can't take Duke, then I don't wanna go."

The kid's mother tried to push the kid along.

"He don't mean that."

The enforcer drew his gun.

"Sure he don't mean that, but we'll see."

He shot the dog.

The kid moved along. But he looked at the guy, filing away the enforcer's face in his mind.

1345 HOURS.

The enforcer loading them up for Rocket 31 fixed his eye on a teenager with a mutinous crew cut.

"Up against the wall."

The kid leaned to the gantry frame while the enforcer frisked him. Inside the kid's shirt was what felt like a small potted plant. The enforcer spoke in a whisper.

"What is it, kid?"

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The kid answered in a whisper.

"Acapulco gold, man. Best pot there is. I'll deal you in when I get it going."

The enforcer filed away the kid's face in his mind, then winked and passed him through.

1525 HOURS.

The last group left the blockhouse they had waited in all these hours and lined up at the gantry elevator to Rocket 40.

One of the older women, still with love beads and glowing paint and headband full of rainbow feathers, knelt for a second, crossed herself, and rose, pushing herself up from the ground. When she came to the enforcer, she reached across with her left hand to dig her ticket out of her right pocket. The enforcer took her right hand and opened it. Dirt. He frowned, then his face cleared. Earth. He folded her hand and gestured her on.

Tony's jeep pulled up. Ferro bucked the line to get their bags on the elevator. Ferro rode them up and stowed them in the luggage compartment of the passenger stage, then rode back down to stand beside Tony.

He watched the enforcer stop a guy wearing one of those phony beards.

"Why the hell ain't you pulled off your beard yet?" Then the enforcer read the ticket the guy had handed him. "Oh. Sorry, Johnny, but you know how it is. Every bit of weight counts."

Ferro's gaze snapped to the now-naked face. That wasn't Johnny Vecchio's new face. That was the face of the guy that should've been a stiff in Marta's motel unit. Jay Factor was the guy's name. The guy had lived and learned and got away. He could've blown the whole thing.

Ferro sweated. He cut a glance at Tony but Tony had his mind on something else. Ferro gave a flickering thought to Johnny Vecchio. The hell with Johnny Vecchio.

He watched the fake Johnny Vecchio get into the elevator. He would take care of the guy for good once they were up and away.

Tony's gaze followed Clara Dellaripa. Tony could remember when Rose had picked three-year-old Clara up and said, "She's a real doll." He had given Rose a look of disgust and said, "No she ain't. She's a real girl." Clara had stared at him and given him a slow smile. She had liked him. She had peed on his lap.

She was a real woman now. She would make a good mother for his sons. He had always thought so, but while her grandfather Vince Podesta was in the same world, Tony had kept that thought way in the back of his head. But now—

He would own a world. He would put down roots in new soil. He would found a dynasty.

He looked back at the Launch Control Center. The group of last-

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ditch Mustache Petes he had left in charge of the Firing Room was the ugliest-looking he could put together. He hoped they wouldn't all drop dead on him in the excitement. He hoped that those of them like Don Pezzo who knew the score and had accepted their fate could keep in line those who didn't know the score but were beginning to realize that this was no mere heist. But the hostages the other short-enders and fall guys were sitting on should hold the thing together to the end. He looked around.

At last. He rode up to the payload level. Last man aboard. The captain and his ship.

"Tony."

He turned from the hatch to see Nick. Nick in a technician's white suit. Nick standing on the gantry platform.

"Glad you made it after all, kid." He looked past Nick. "Nobody with you? Bugle already inside?"

Nick shook his head.

"So you done him like you done the Corvinos? Well, that's all right. We're all our own kind now. Unless you already got Marta and her kid aboard? What's the matter, Nick? You look funny. Jeez, don't just stand there. Get in if you're coming. We ain't got no more time."

"I only came to tell you something, Tony. The sun isn't going nova. The whole thing was a con to get rid of the Mafia." Nick smiled. "That's it, goombah. Or, in a more tony accent, compare."

Tony's brain went nova, then subsided.

"There is a starship up there? It will take us to another planet?"

"Yes and yes."

"You in on it from the start?"

"That's something you'll never know."

Nick was backing toward a hole. Maybe if he kept talking to Nick, the punk would fall through.

"See your mother go in?"

Nick nodded.

"Say anything to her?"

Nick shook his head.

"See Clara go in?"

Nick nodded.

"Say anything to her?"

Nick shook his head.

"That's good. I wouldn't want anybody aboard to know. Be kind of a big joke on me, wouldn't it?"

Nick was smiling past him but that was an old trick.

"You got anything else to tell me, kid? No? Well, I got something else to tell you. You know, you're like your father—only your brain's really gone soft. I don't think you're gonna do nothing to spoil this rocket when I tell you. A lot of people on it beside me. Your mother, for one. And Clara." He smiled. "I conned you about the Corvinos. They never killed your father and put him in the crusher. It was me. That's it, figlioccio."

Nick stopped just short of the hole. It would have to be the gun.

But as Tony went for his gun, a voice came from behind, and he

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couldn't help half-turning his head. Yet the corner of his eye told him Nick had fallen through the hole after all. The sudden appearance of Ferro must've done it.

" 'Scuse me, Don Tony, was that true what he said? About the sun ain't gonna blow up?"

Tony turned slowly. He smiled at the creases in Ferro's brow.

"Oh, you heard what he said?"

Ferro nodded.

"Is it true?"

"That's something you'll never know."

Tony pulled the trigger. Ferro folded over the hatchway. Tony dragged the body to the hole and pitched it in after Nick.

He climbed into the rocket, calmed those inside, dogged down the door, and strapped himself into his couch.

He laughed. He would never forget Nick's eyes.

Nick, taking the smooth turns and slides of the teflon escape tube, heard the shot and then something slithering after him. As soon as his feet touched down he stepped aside.

He waited, then something landed in a bloody crumple. Poor Jimmy Ferro hadn't touched himself against the evil eye.

Nick raced to the end of the corridor, skidded into the safety chamber, swung the door shut and dogged it down, and slowly let himself down on a bench.

1700 HOURS.

The Army moved in at last, taking the jaunty surrender of the Mustache Petes, except for some who wanted to go down fighting.

A patrol found Nick Tallant in the safety chamber, led him out, jeeped him to the Launch Control Center, and led him into an office.

They searched him, had some people look at him, then sat him down under guard.

1730 HOURS.

A helicopter landed outside.

The sergeant snapped to attention, yelled "Ten-*hut!*" and saluted.

Buglewicz, a newspaper swagger stick under his arm, came in with a colonel. He let the colonel take the salute. He stared at Nick so hard the sergeant apologized.

"We'll move him someplace else, sir. They say he's not one of the Space Center technicians. We found a dead body near where we picked him up. We're holding him for questioning."

Buglewicz waved that away.

"I know him. Excuse me, Colonel."

He levered Nick up by the elbow and led him into a corner.

"You won't mention my momentary aberration, will you, Tallant. I don't want to lean on you by putting it as your word against mine. I'll put it as you cover for me and I'll cover for you."

Buglewicz saw he had Nick's numbness, if not his word. He led

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Nick back and handed him the newspaper.

"Here, sit down and catch up with what's been going on."

Buglewicz turned to help the Army, the Launch Control Center, and the government tie up the loose ends.

Nick found himself gazing at a headline in Second-Coming type that took up the whole front page to say "U.S. OUSTS COSTRA NOSTRA!"

The inside pages gave out little more. For the sake of the space-station technicians who were, under duress, helping the hijackers dock the payloads and erase the dotted line of rockets in parking orbit, the government was saving details till the starship was beyond doubt streaking out of the solar system.

Back of the center-fold wirephotos of the Easter Parade, which reminded him it was Easter Sunday, an item with a Pasadena dateline stopped him.

MYSTERY DEATH
LINKED TO
MYSTERY DEATH

Pasadena (UP)—Boyd Sandsmark, 35, a noted astrophysicist, was found early today in his home at 1132 Romance Blvd. dead of gas asphyxiation. Sgt. Arthur Usery and Patrolman Thomas Scruggs, answering a neighbor's call of a gas smell, smelled gas, heard the television playing, but got no response.

They broke in and discovered Sandsmark's body, which lay on the kitchen floor, head on a pillow, close to the open jets of the oven. The officers shut off the gas and carried the body outdoors at once, and Patrolman Scruggs attempted mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but in vain. It was later determined that Sandsmark had been dead several hours.

"I couldn't help being a 'nosy neighbor'," said Mrs. Ursula Perkins of 1137 Romance Blvd., mustering a smile though still shaken by the find. "I mean the smell of gas was quite strong when I passed by with Roger—he's my champion Irish setter. And it was really his barking that alerted me. So we hurried back home and phoned the police, didn't we, Roger?" Roger, who has a beautiful gloss, thumped agreement.

The mystery deepened when police found a gun buried under a rose bush at the entrance to Sandsmark's house. After subjecting the weapon to ballistics tests, Pasadena police said they would have liked to question Sandsmark in connection with the recent murder of Fred Globus, 27, a colleague of Sandsmark's . . .

1800 HOURS.

Since it was Easter Sunday, the inmates had it extra easy. Benny was sweeping Don Vincenzo Podesta's boccie court. Feet came to-

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wards him and he quickly lessened the arc and the force of the broom.

"Hey, Benny, what you doing that for? Ain't you heard the latest?"

It was Mooch. Benny looked up slowly, dully.

"What latest?"

"There ain't no more Mafia outside."

"Aah, you're putting me on."

"Yeah? Here comes Don Vince. Watch. Hey, Vince. Yeah, you, fart-face."

Don Vince stopped. His eyes came from another plane of seeing to fix on Mooch.

Benny sucked in his breath.

Mooch spat. A bubbly blob landed on Don Vince's pants leg.

Don Vince's face mottled. He took out a handkerchief and started to bend. A ball-point pen fell from his shirt pocket and, as it hit, its cap came off. Don Vince straightened. He looked at Benny and held out the handkerchief.

"Here, wipe. And pick that thing up."

Benny took the handkerchief. He picked up the pen.

"And get the thing that goes on the point."

Benny stared at the pen in his hand and found he wasn't holding it like a pen. He let the cap lie. He looked into Vince's eyes.

Nick's hand flashed to his brow.

Buglewicz broke off talking to the colonel.

"What's wrong, Tallant?"

"Nothing, I guess."

It had struck like a bolt of something between headache and toothache, but it was too faint and soon gone. Funny, for the first time in many days he remembered Don Vince.

Buglewicz dry-washed his hands and turned back to the colonel.

"Yes, Colonel, we kept well within the limit of acceptable casualties."

Nick let Buglewicz's voice drone itself out of hearing. Violence was American as cherry pie, pizza, and collard greens. He wondered what Buglewicz and his masters would dream up for Packo Ledyard's twenty million people. He stared at the ceiling. Meanwhile, Earthfolk would be driving into the night until they found their day, their new sun among the other stars.

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THE EVERGREEN LIBRARY

by Bill Pronzini
and Jeffrey Wallmann

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The revelation that he had never previously visited the estate of old Pruitt Evergreen, in all the years he had handled the aged and white-haired gentleman's legal affairs, struck Simon Graham for the first time as he guided his Lincoln Continental along the Dutch elm-bordered private lane. Not once had he had occasion to make the long drive from Philadelphia, through meandering miles of autumnal-colored Pennsylvania countryside, and Graham found himself wondering at Evergreen's lack of hospitality over the past three decades. After all, he had represented old Pruitt's mundane and infrequent needs ever since he had begun his practice prior to the Second World War, carrying out whatever wishes were asked of him during personal contact at his office, or by telephone.

It was ironic, Graham thought, that this first visit would undoubtedly be his last—for its causal purpose was Pruitt Evergreen's death, of a simple coronary, the previous Thursday.

Although he would, after his own fashion, miss the wry wit and gentle amiable manner, Graham could not help but feel old Pruitt had had a long and comfortable life—a happy one—and that his passing was without regrets. In fact, it had almost been as if Evergreen had foreseen his mortal end, for his last visit to Graham's office had concerned the drafting of a will and instructions as to the apportionment of his property. That meeting had been short and businesslike; since Evergreen had no living relatives, was the last of a Pilgrim family which had settled the area in 1630, the bulk of the estate was to pass to The Enchiridion Society—a European group of which Graham knew little, save that it had something to do with books (enchiridion being an archaic sort of synonym for book) and that old Pruitt had had a life-long attachment to it. A representative of the Society was arriving in Philadelphia the following afternoon, and as Evergreen's duly appointed legal delegate, Graham had decided on the impromptu visit to make certain everything on the estate was in order.

He rounded a gentle curve now, passing through a thick copse of the Dutch elms, and there, in a wide clearing a hundred yards distant, he saw the Evergreen mansion.

It was a true anachronism in the modern world of high-rise concrete and glass, and suburban stucco; constructed of rust-colored brick, hand-mortared with care and precision, it had withstood two full centuries of natural erosion. It was huge, of pre-Revolutionary design, two-storied and elongated, with a sloping gabled roof from which jutted a

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series of darkly wood-framed dormer windows. A narrow widow's walk followed the width of the dwelling above the second story front. Behind and to one side was a carriage house, and two small outbuildings which had once quartered servants.

Graham entered a circular drive and brought the Continental to a stop before a porch grown heavy with scarlet bougainvillea. He sighed ponderously as he stepped from the large car. Once a college athlete, he had dined on too much gourmet food and drunk too much fine wine with the success of his law practice to retain his youthful physique; but the extra girth that had come with middle age only seemed to add judicious solidarity to his bearing. His conservative herringbone suit and rigidly proper posture gave him the attitude of ultra-respectability, an attitude which he cultivated wisely. He had a round, trusting face with penetrating gray eyes and a firm, resolute mouth that rarely smiled; life, with its attendant responsibilities and decisions, was much too sober a burden for levity.

Yet, surrounded as he now was by heavy wood and the imposing Evergreen mansion-and-grounds, Graham sensed a certain diminishing of his own status. There was about this place an air of quiet antiquity, which was at once serenely relaxing and faintly disquieting. It was almost as if time had somehow ceased its inexorable passage on the grounds of this estate, allowing it to remain forever as it had been during the era of Washington, Jefferson, and the Declaration of Independence.

He walked onto the porch and fitted into the door lock the large brass key which, until last Thursday, had belonged to Mrs. Donnelly, Pruitt Evergreen's housekeeper. He swung open one half of the arched double doors which served as the main entrance. They were fastened at either jamb by wide, triangular hinges—much in the fashion of New England church doors—and the one creaked vaguely in the late afternoon stillness. The sound had an odd, melancholy quality in Graham's ears.

He stepped inside, pulling the door closed behind him. He stood in a large vestibule—shadowed, smelling mildly but not unpleasantly of age-must. On his left, the vestibule opened into a massive sitting room with a high-beamed ceiling and an impressive stone-and-mortar fireplace which comprised one entire wall. The furniture was old and heavily ponderous, built solidly by wood craftsmen whose life span had not nearly approximated that of their creations.

On his right, Graham saw a smaller entranceway which

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afforded him a look into a good-sized dining room. Across its bare, polished hardwood floor he could see through another doorway into a Quaker-like kitchen, functional and without neoteric luxuries. At the far end of the vestibule was a wide, curving staircase of thick varnished wood, with gleaming and highly ornate bannisters.

He entered the sitting room and stood for a moment in the center of the floor. He had a brief feeling of inconsequentiality, as he had upon leaving his car outside, but he refused to allow it to linger. He thought, as his eyes moved about the room, that if he were to call out the heavy walls would send his voice back to him in a series of reverberating echoes.

Pruitt Evergreen had died in that room. Mrs. Donnelly, a matronly woman who came twice each week, had discovered his body sitting peacefully in the ancient Colonial rocker near the hearth, a pipe with blackened dottle in its bowl clasped in one hand, his shoeless feet placed comfortably on the tufted footrest. If the housekeeper could be believed, there had been a slight and beatific smile on the old man's lips—though of course Graham considered this observation to be feminine hyperbole.

He spent the next fifteen minutes wandering from room to room on the main floor, admiring with an appreciative eye the fine old appointments contained in each. As he passed through a small sewing room off the sitting room, he noticed a curtained area at one end; he parted the drapery there, revealing a tiny alcove. Set into the wall opposite was a great oak door with a brass knob and an imposing key latch. Graham wondered in a perfunctorily curious way what lay beyond it, and after a moment he approached the door. He tried the brass knob and found it locked securely. Odd, he thought, frowning, and then he remembered the ring of two keys which Pruitt Evergreen had given him during that last, farewell visit; Graham's instructions had been to present them to The Enchiridion Society representative when the time came. He had brought them along on today's journey solely because, being a meticulous man, there was the possibility that they might become necessary.

Selecting the larger of the two keys, Graham unlocked the oak door and pushed it open.

A murky darkness was all he was able to discern at first, but once his pupils dilated sufficiently he determined that the room beyond the door was a huge library—though rather a strange sort of library for a private dwelling. The walls were literally coated with books, on gnarled, warped, unvarnished wooden shelves from floor to ceiling and

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extending for as far as he could see in the dimness; lines of similar shelves, with narrow aisleways between them, comprised the remainder of the room, and Graham was reminded of the stacks in a public or college library. There was, however, no apparent reading area; there were only books, what looked like hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of books.

He took two tentative steps into the room. The ceiling was relatively low, certainly much lower than those in the house's other chambers, and Graham concluded that there was at least one other floor above him. As his eyes grew more accustomed to the gloom, he saw a pair of narrow spiral staircases—of the type found in public libraries—which wound upward, confirming his deduction.

On his left, Graham saw two thin, tall windows rising beyond the ceiling to some indeterminate height. Their multi-paned glass was so begrimed as to allow very little light to pass through; what few rays did manage to penetrate were further diffused by the swirling eddies of flaking, pale ash dust his intrusion had disrupted. It seemed as if the housekeeper, for some inexplicable reason, had never been permitted into the library for purposes of cleaning; the front section of the house was immaculate.

Automatically, Graham's hand touched the inside wall in search of a light switch. But he found none. Not only had the library peculiarly been denied cleaning, he decided, but the luxury of electricity as well.

He moved forward, slowly, as one does when entering a dark and unfamiliar cellar. His eyes caught, on the floor near the end of the nearest stack, a volume which had apparently fallen from its place on one of the shelves. He picked it up and opened it to the frontispiece. *Twice-Told Tales,* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. There was no copyright date, although the book's date of publication was clear: 1837. While Graham was not by any means a bibliophile, there was no doubt in his mind that this was a first edition; it had that unmistakable, somehow tangible feel of rarity, of fragility, which can only be associated with genuine antiques.

He rubbed some of the dust from the binding with the tips of his fingers, carefully, and then attempted to replace the book on the shelf. As he did so, his eye caught the printing on the spine of another of the books there: *Twice-Told Tales,* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Graham peered at it for a moment. It was obviously a duplicate, a much later edition; its binding was without age cracks, freshly printed. Now that was damned queer, Graham thought. Why had Evergreen

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allowed a new edition of a work to be shelved, while an extremely rare first edition was permitted to lie in thick dust on the floor?

He placed the first edition beside the copy, and then crossed to the far right hand wall. He scanned the titles of the books on the shelves there, and lying carelessly on the floor, and his amazement grew by leaps and bounds. Evergreen's library contained tomes of incalculable worth, almost all of which were yellowed, fragile, crumbling. It was a collection of Americana to stagger the imagination.

There, cradled in a mound of ashen dust: The first book printed in the English Colonies, at Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1640—*Bay Psalm Book.* That alone was worth a king's ransom.

And there, beyond it: *The New England Primer,* 1683.

And beyond that: Cotton Mather, *Wonders of the Invisible World,* 1693.

Graham continued slowly along the narrow aisleway, and a certain anger began to build inside him. First editions of volumes which had achieved some degree of fame, whether historical or purely on literary merit, had been permitted to lie disintegrating on the dusty floor while obviously new copies were granted shelf space. Dust-filled gaps in the rows apparently indicated the original resting place of the rare first editions.

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense,* an original pamphlet, 1776.

Joel Barlow, *Hasty Pudding,* 1796.

Washington Irving, *History of New York* ("by Diedrich Knickerbocker") 1809. . .

What the devil had possessed Evergreen? Graham wondered. Had he somehow not realized the value of his possessions? No, that was highly unlikely; a schoolboy would have recognized the priceless books which the library contained. Perhaps he had simply lost interest in it, had ceased in his declining years to care whether such literary treasures decayed into oblivion or not.

The Saturday Evening Post, first issue, 1821.

James Fenimore Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans,* 1826.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Outre-Mer,* 1833 . . .

How had old Pruitt managed to collect such a fantastic storehouse of valuable publications? Certainly he could not have acquired them alone, without help. Graham frowned. What of The Enchiridion Society, that rather mysterious European organization to which Evergreen had willed his estate? Could it be that he had obtained assistance, financial backing, from them? It was possible, of course, but the prodigious amount of labor, of money, involved would have taxed any *public* institution—surely placing

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such an endeavor beyond the realm of feasibility for an obscurely private group. Why, the necessary funds alone would have been prohibitive for one year, much less a lifetime!

Edgar Allen Poe, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque,* 1840.

Herman Melville, *Typee,* 1846.

Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* 1849 . . .

Graham considered. Perhaps the library had been Pruitt Evergreen's heritage, begun ten score years previously by the first Evergreen and subsequently handed down from generation to generation with each succeeding member of the family adding those books which had achieved some degree of status in American Literature during his own lifetime. That, at least, made a certain sense—and would explain the last of the Evergreen's having willed the estate to a book society. Too, there was the fact that those publications remaining on the shelves had not been arranged in the Dewey Decimal System, or by author, or by any other normal means of cataloguing; but that they were, however, placed in a kind of careless chronological order. Most of the titles of lesser known works were past all decipherability—if, indeed, the volumes themselves had not disintegrated partially or completely.

Still, the question of why newer editions of the most famous, the most important, the most valuable, items had been purchased and then put on the shelves in their chronological place—while the first editions lay mouldering on the dusty floor—was left unanswered.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* 1852.

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 1855.

Atlantic Monthly, first issue, 1857 . . .

The room appeared to stretch endlessly, its rear wall but a nebulous outline in Graham's vision, seemingly no closer than when he had begun. He paused. Surely this house, elongated though it was, could not be as long as it presented itself. It must be a trick of perspective, he thought; an optical illusion.

He moved forward, and then paused again next to one of the tall windows. He rubbed at a pane of glass, in an effort to see what lay outside, but the grime had corroded the glass to permanent frostiness; he could see nothing. Turning frontally again, he spied in a hiatus in the shelving one of the narrow staircases which led upward to a second floor. He found himself wondering, if his theory of a heritage of bibliophiles was indeed accurate, what contributions Pruitt Evergreen might have made to the li-

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[redacted] eco- [redacted] not quite so [redacted], so warped, as that on the previous floor—that he had advanced more than sixty years in literary time. Possibly this was the last floor of the library after all.

Nevertheless, the dust here was almost as thick as it had been below—and the most famous, the most acclaimed volumes again lay strewn profusely about the powdery floor.

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio,* 1919.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise,* 1920

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land,* 1922.

Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time,* 1924. . .

The volumes grew more and more familiar, and Graham saw that a good number of the better known periodicals of the era now graced the shelves. Pruitt Evergreen's contribution to his lineage had been no small one, that was

A coldness settled between Graham's shoulder blades. He turned page after page, finding them extremely unpliable, not at all like the leaves of a book ought to be. He looked up again at the rows of olive spines, and the coldness spread viscidly along his back as a thought passed into his conscious mind—a thought which had found spawn sometime during his traversement of the stacks, but which his sub-conscious had [redacted] to allow him to then con-

Intruder [redacted]

Death of a Salesman [redacted]

Graham stopped short, his forehead corrugating as he peered into the dimness ahead of him. Was that a door set into the side wall? He moved closer. Yes, a heavy oak door like the one through which he had first passed into the library downstairs, set into a projected frame. He approached it, tested the brass knob, found it locked. Instinctively, he removed the key ring from his pocket and fitted the second of the two keys into the lock. The key turned, and the door swung inward.

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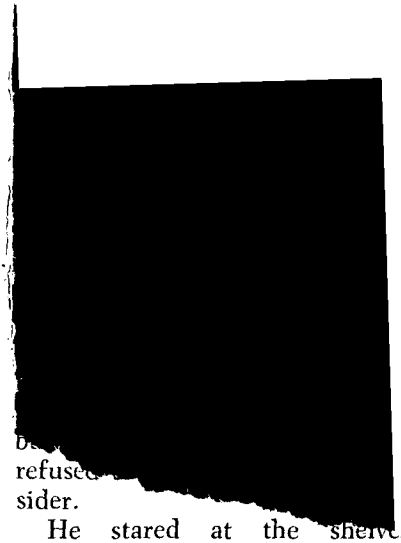

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brary before allowing it to go to seed. He mounted the wooded stairs.

The second floor was an exact duplicate of the main one below. Even the tall, thin windows stretched upward beyond the ceiling. How many more floors were there? he wondered. Certainly no more than one, at the most two; the house had only two stories. He started down the nearest corridor, noting by the colorful jackets and modern bindings—which decorated shelving not quite so gnarled, so warped, as that on the previous floor—that he had advanced more than sixty years in literary time. Possibly this was the last floor of the library after all.

Nevertheless, the dust here was almost as thick as it had been below—and the most famous, the most acclaimed volumes again lay strewn profusely about the powdery floor.

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio,* 1919.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise,* 1920

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land,* 1922.

Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time,* 1924. . .

The volumes grew more and more familiar, and Graham saw that a good number of the better known periodicals of the era now graced the shelves. Pruitt Evergreen's contribution to his lineage had been no small one, that was readily apparent; in fact, to have collected even a representative cross-section, a relatively large percentage of the inestimable amount of magazines and books which America consumed, was almost beyond comprehension.

Titles assailed his eyes in passing:

Gone With the Wind.
Of Mice and Men.
The Male Animal.
A Bell for Adano.
The Iceman Cometh.
Intruder in the Dust.
Death of a Salesman . . .

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A coldness settled between Graham's shoulder blades. He turned page after page, finding them extremely unpliable, not at all like the leaves of a book ought to be. He looked up again at the rows of olive spines, and the coldness spread viscidly along his back as a thought passed into his conscious mind—a thought which had found spawn sometime during his traversement of the stacks, but which his sub-conscious had refused to allow him to then consider.

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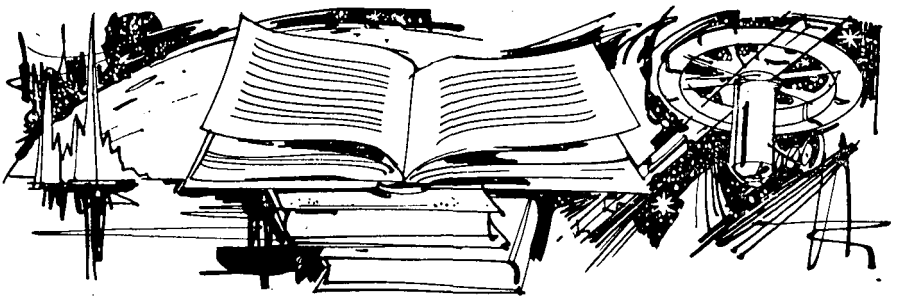

Books

When I was in college in the 1950's, and undergraduate publications were not quite so far undergound as they are now, most of the campus humor magazines were still doing parodies. And one of the favorite formats was the As So-And-So Might Have Written It device. This produced works like Little Red Riding Hood as William Faulkner might have written it and Hamlet as Sir Winston Churchill might have written it. All of which was considered great fun in those days. Now in the 1970's, as I go through the books *Venture* provides me, I'm frequently reminded of that old format. I have the notion there must now be an accepted science fiction format called something like the SF Novel As A Major Author Might Have Written It. At least there appears to be a growing group of writers who grit their teeth, clench their fists and force out importantly written stuff. Since most of the books of this type are not the fun to read the old parodies were, and since they aren't really much more than awkward hybrids, my official policy at the moment is to avoid reviewing most of them.

H. G. WELLS
Lovat Dickson
Atheneum, $10.00

Part of Dickson's able biography is devoted to Wells' early struggles as an underpaid science-fiction writer. If you happen to be an underpaid science-fiction writer yourself you probably won't be able to afford the rather stiff price of this book. Try to catch it at the library then, since it is a good concise account not only of Wells' writing, but of his business life, his private life and the unfortunate things that happened to

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him after he graduated from novelist to prophet.

CRIME PREVENTION IN THE 30TH CENTURY
Hans Stefan Santesson, Editor
Walker, $5.95

Another anthology with a theme. This one includes accounts of future crime by Miriam Allen deFord, Harry Harrison, William Tenn and Anne McAffrey. Ten stories in all, if you count a couple of clunks as stories.

THE STANDING JOY
Wyman Guin
Avon, 75¢

Here is a first novel just like everyone's first novel, except for some science fiction grafted on here and there. We've all read, and many of us have probably written and stuck away in a crate, this book before. Adolescent growing up, family life in a small town, discovery of sex, bull sessions about the meaning of life, whimsical visits to bordellos. Guin peps up his version by making his growing boy a superkid and by dropping a few hints here and there about a great parallel world a-coming. Still, this chronicle of coming of age in the late 1920's and early 30's is really just one more, and not a bad example, of the what it's like to grow up novel. This is not to say a science fiction novel shouldn't deal with the pains and joys of adolescence, only that it must be less schizoid in doing so. Guin's notions about what constitutes sexual enjoyment, by the way, seem joyless and statistical. But perhaps he doesn't actually share his young hero's preoocupation with keeping score.

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF BUCK ROGERS IN THE 25TH CENTURY
Dick Calkins & Philip F. Nowlan, et al
Chelsea House, $12.50

This is one of the biggest, fattest comic books ever published in this country certainly. Some 370 pages thick, it weighs five pounds and offers several years of daily *Buck Rogers* comic strips plus a year or so of selected Sunday pages in color. And what is *Buck Rogers* exactly? Surely it must be one of the great awful creations of our century. It is a work of the imagination which has transcended some of the ugliest drawing ever put on paper and some of the most inept dialogue ever written. Begun in 1929, this clumsy, racist and scientifically cockeyed strip has inspired generations of boys to new heights of invention and speculation. Just as some people can become ecstatic by smoking weeds, others can apparently grow euphoric by looking at trash. Admirers of Ray Bradbury will cherish his introduction to this

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volume. Bradbury, like Little Orphan Annie, has been able to hold on to the point of view of a nine year old well into middle years, and his breathless introduction makes a perfect wrapping for this load of nostalgia.

KRAZY KAT
George Herriman
Grosset & Dunlap, $7.95

Another venerable old comic strip reprinted. A handsome collection of Herriman's eclectic and wacky feature, which is one of the most individual fantasy works ever. The strip may be a science fiction work, too, since it managed to be almost everything at least once. A more welcome, though unfortunately less fat, collection than the one above.

—RON GOULART

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot: LXXIII

Ferdinand Feghoot was the confidant of Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, the French 18th Century pornographer; and it was to Feghoot alone that Restif divulged his most closely held secret—the strange English branch of his family in Buckinghamshire.

Feghoot naturally wanted to meet them.

"No, no, dear friend!" Restif exclaimed. "They strike terror into everyone's heart! Imagine, they were even expelled from the unspeakable Hell-Fire Club! Were it not for Uncle Nathaniel, I shudder to think what might happen. His will is of iron. Only he can control them."

But Feghoot prevailed, and a week later they approached Direwolf Hall. A wicked darkness had fallen.

"Oh, I do hope Uncle Nathaniel hasn't gone up to London!" moaned Restif as sounds of ungodly revelry reached their ears.

At that instant, a half-naked wench dashed into the road screaming horribly; two burly men burst into view fighting with daggers; and a terrified clergyman came running towards them.

"Gentlemen, go no further, I pray you!" he cried. "Hell has opened! Satan and all his imps are abroad!"

"Calm yourself, Reverend Sir," said Ferdinand Feghoot, quite unperturbed. "It isn't as bad as all that. The Restifs are Nateless tonight."

—GRENDEL BRIARTON

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The Big Fight

by C. G. Cobb

BENSON WAS A BRAWLER, A first-class barroom slugger who'd cleared out taverns on upwards of a hundred different worlds. He was an Ordinary Merchanter for the Greater Redline Freight Company, which as everyone knows is a subsidiary of Phoenix Mutual Conglomerates, Inc. Benson had been an Ordinary Merchanter for nine of the ten years he'd berthed with Greater Redline and had the seniority to take Supervisor exams of one variety or another, but always shied away because the responsibility involved would keep him from his fighting. In ten years of Galactic Standard traveling time he'd collected his victories like bits of string, and the total big ball of winning fights he'd tied together was huge indeed. His reputation had followed him for years and now preceded him, what with gamblers and other interested parties keeping careful track of Benson's starship's docking schedule. Benson was proud of his reputation and rightly so.

As a green Apprentice 'chanter he'd whipped sixteen Ordinaries in three days on Ganymede Jump-Off, and those sixteen were known as the Aloha Committee (Aloha being the old Terran-Hawaiian term for Hello and Goodbye) who made a practice out of knocking seven bells out of cocky young Apprentices. That's what did it for Benson. Henceforth ev-

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ery new Apprentice who came through Ganymede Jump-Off heard about Benson whipping the Aloha Committee, not to mention the grapevine enjoyed by the Ordinary 'chanters, to say nothing of the communications network the Chiefs and Supers had developed almost to the point of telepathy. True, the Committee's reputation did slip badly at first, until they waded successfully through scores of eager Apprentices and Ordinaries. It was then that Benson came to be regarded in the awesome light of legend.

Everybody was after him then. He slugged his way through Greater Redline's fistic hierarchy. He stomped the toughest employees of Brand X, Redline's big competitor, and whipped every other strong boy in eight freight company in the alphabet. He tromped all over the Star Marines and whipped the best from the Elite Home Guard of a dozen planets before the governors and presidents and generals and kings got smart and issued face-saving orders to stay the hell away from that Benson wild man.

He wasn't really a wild man. And he wasn't all that big, either. He was average size, six feet four, two hundred twenty-five pounds, and his face wasn't too lumpy from more than four hundred brawls. He looked just like an average Earth-born 'chanter, the kind you see around every dock on every world, the kind your arrogant seven-footers get a notion to cuff around to please the broads. After they tried it, though, it was Benson the broads got all gaspy for. In action, he was sheer excitement. But otherwise, like I say, he was average, likeable. The kind you'd like to start a round of drinks with and get to know better. He was personable and not too swell-headed from all the attention, and only a moderate talker. Benson and I buddied for a year or two because we were bunk-mates and it was the custom, but I like to think that neither of us had to strain for it. We had an easy, confident friendship.

Greater Redline grew to appreciate Benson's unique job of public relations and rewarded him with pay raises and bonuses above the norm when he refused promotion beyond Ordinary Merchanter. The rest of us didn't mind that much because we'd win on wages what we couldn't make up in pay grade. Of course, Benson didn't always win. He was no superman, after all. But the ones he lost were so close he always got a rematch by popular demand, and that's where he always got his revenge and the rest of us won our big wagers.

That was the secret of Benson's success, you see: he was adaptable. He'd figure out an opponent's strength and defend against that, and he'd figure the other

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guy's weakness and capitalize on *that.* He had no definite style. His only characteristic while fighting was to do what the other fellow intended to do to him, only first if possible, and harder and more permanent. Like the time he fought the black man who was an expert at the old spectacular Earthside-Oriental style. You know, jump in the air and kick the adversary in the belly with both feet. This joker leaped and found that Benson had just left. Benson, out of the way, waited till the leaper hit the ground and then put the shoes to him. It was over in about half a minute, we collected our winnings, shook Benson's hand, and we all left together in flaming glory.

There was a small circle of us that always moved around together dockside, and Benson liked to say to us, after drinking some of the local booze, that he'd never met a man he hadn't whipped. Then he met the Kokai. Even after that, he could have said it but he didn't. He never said it again after he met the Kokai. Here's how it happened:

We docked and spilled cargo on a little Edgeworld called Webster, and after drawing our passes we filed naked through the P/M Room to get boosted for all the local ailments, drew our civvies, and hit the bars. I mentioned already that Webster was an Edgeworld and a pretty dumpy one at that, but we'd been there once before and they'd all heard of Benson in any case. There were some in the bars that remembered Benson from before, and they tried to crowd in close so they could belt Benson or crack him with a booze crock, just to say they'd done it, but the rest of us kept them back. Benson fought only the best a world had to offer.

We moved around, not drinking much, looking for a bet. Of course, the word had got around that Benson was dockside on Webster, and the crowd collected early. All of us started picking out a woman for later. Berthing a star freighter with Benson was fine duty.

Around nineteen hundred that first evening, a dark muscular kid about seven feet two came in with an entourage of yes-men and sent his flunky over to call Benson out. Benson wouldn't even look at the yes-man, just sipped his booze right from the crock and sort of rolled it in his mouth before swallowing it. He looked like he was having to work himself up to having a good time. Bradislav talked with the flunky:

"Champion, huh?" he chuckled, sneering over the flunkey's shoulder at the dark muscular kid. "Champion of *what?* He looks like the bouncer in a house of pleasure for homosexuals."

The dark muscular kid (who had a big thick shock of pale

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blond hair) had been staring abstractedly at the ceiling and attempting to look as bored as Benson, but that crack of Bradislav's made him glare down and grit his teeth. From where I was sitting, his canines looked an inch long. He was a pretty big kid. He nudged the yes-man standing alongside with his elbow and made the yes-man look like he was hemorraging internally. "Hey," growled the kid, "take that loudmouth's picture. I want him for later." The yes-man wheezed in a painful breath and snapped Bradislav with his little palm-sized tri-D. Bradislav guffawed.

"Haw, haw, haw! You better just settle for me, kid. Little girls like you don't even get near Benson. Why, he'd wad you up and stuff you in that little tri-D."

That made the kid's lips peel back against his teeth. At his altitude his pale hair shone above his dark craggy face and reminded me of a snow-capped mountain. His skin got darker and the blood pumped up to pressure and his muscles got definite and dangerous. Hey, he swelled up like one of those howling tree-hangers on that crazy planet in the Antares system. Some of the gents stacked up at the bar started making bets.

Well, it went like that for a while, Bradislav insulting the kid and pumping him up till we all thought he'd split six ways, and getting up the gamblers at the bar. Benson had swung around in his chair and was studying the kid calmly, now and then belching from the booze in the crock. When the bets started coming wild and heavy we covered as many as we could and moved out back.

Somebody had already set up two docking lights back of the bar and they made a lucid shadow-free arena in the wide alley. They set up portable force-fields in a square, let Benson and the kid get inside, and turned them on. Someone yelled: "GO!" and the fight was on.

Benson stood relaxed and ready, hands held up but not too high, watching and waiting for the kid. The kid lunged at Benson and threw a right fist at him. Benson jerked his head to the outside and the punch was whizzing past his ear when he rushed the kid, leaping forward and upward, and his bent right arm slammed against the kid's collarbone and snaked around his neck. Benson joined his hands behind the kid's back, and the rush of his leap carried the tall kid backward, off balance. Benson's feet hit the ground and planted there, and the local champ was bent over backward, resting on Benson's back and hip, his right arm extended impotently through the circle of Benson's arms. Then Benson started squeezing, choking the kid against

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his own arm and shoulder. The kid struggled, thrashing like a whale out of water, and it was really something to see, but it wasn't long before his struggles grew weaker and slower, and finally his yes-men had to drop the force-field and fling in the towel. Then we gathered up our winnings, policed up the women, and moved out.

It didn't look like anything else was going to happen that night on that dingy little Edgeworld, and we started to settle down and get drunk and get loved, and that's when someone came in and told us about the Kokai ship.

Now at this time the Kokai were new to us. You know that the Galaxy is filled mostly with us Terran-types, Earth-born or Earth-descended. Not because we're the only intelligent race here (not by a damn sight), but because we are virtually the only ones with sense for commerce. We're the traffickers, the peddlers, the mule-train drivers, the China-merchants. We get around and we get rich. The others have their own interests and their own problems, and many of them are so alien we do our best to leave them alone, and they mostly return the favor. Unless we have something they want. When that's the case, they'll almost always give us something for it. Some of them can't grasp the principle of trade, though, and that's when we have wars, but that's another story. Anyway, the Kokai were new to us, word of them only having just reached many of the Terran worlds. Right away we were all squirming to see one of them.

We all went pouring down to the docks to gape at the Kokai ship, a big awkward-looking thing full of odd angles and unexpected planes, sitting quietly under the docklights. We stood milling around on our side of the force-field and somebody got the harbormaster on the phone and asked him what the hell we had to do to see us a real live Kokai. He was in the midst of telling us to go back to our cups or he'd slosh us down with full-strength hull-cleaner when one of the hatches opened on the funny-looking ship and we had our first look at a living breathing Kokai.

It was average man-size, with big splay-feet, long graceful arms and legs (two each), and long thick torso with bulging powerful shoulders topped off with a head like a nose-cone and no neck at all. Its color was a dark unvarying chocolate brown, and its eyes were long and yellow and swimming with dark-brown flecks. Its nose and ears (we thought that's what they were) were tiny, just wee little bumps, and we had some discussion about where the mouth was located. The general concensus was that it lay somewhere among the tight folds of

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skin that were like a collar running around the base of the head. We discussed the Kokai quietly because of the impression the thing conveyed. That impression was instant and lasting: power. Power and quiet confidence. It stood there silently looking back at us.

Of course, one of the persons present got the idea that it would be an ideal match if this thing were paired off with Benson. Of course, that person was Bradislav.

He elbowed his way to the front and stood before the force-field, gesturing at the Kokai, beckoning it forward, gesticulating, indicating Benson (who stood there just as quietly, just as powerful, just as confident as the Kokai—only drunk), indicating the Kokai, pointing at the two of them and making smashing-together motions with his hands, imitating a fight. Pretty soon everybody in the crowd saw what Bradislav was doing and fell silent, not knowing what the hell to think, wondering if the Kokai would catch on, half wishing that it would. The Kokai stood there in the open hatchway, watching Bradislav waving his arms and gritting his teeth and wiggling his eyebrows and making an ass out of himself, and I'm damned if it didn't catch on. It walked down the ramp and up to the force-field, and all in the crowd hissed in their breath at the quick tight smooth-muscled walk of the Kokai. Its walk said wariness and competence and willingness to mix it with an aggressor, and to us drunks in the crowd it said we'd see the fight of the millennium if both contestants were willing, and to us bunkmates of Benson's it said that if Benson solved the Kokai's style we could retire on the winnings from these Webster yokels who were a sure thing to bet on the Kokai.

The Kokai walked up to the force-field and held up a big splay-fingered hand (six fingers) and a fieldkey glimmered round and flat in it, and the field opened into a shimmering doorway that let the Kokai through. The crowd moved back away from it and it walked right up to Benson and they stared into each other's eyes, Benson's green eyes like the oceans of Vega Three, the Kokai's yellow eyes blazing like naked suns. Then the Kokai's big flat chocolate hand whipped out and slapped Benson's face before he could blink.

It was *fierce,* the quickness of it. The crowd made a big round resonant collective "Ooooh," and we all moved back a pace. All but Bradislav.

He jumped between them and stood swaying with drink, gesturing at the Kokai with pushing movement of both hands, muttering at Benson, "Not yet, not yet, sober up first," from the corner of his mouth. The Kokai must have

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had some kind of *rapport* with Bradislav. It moved back a step, signalling its willingness to wait, and three of us came forward and took Benson by the arms and chest and pushed him backward. Benson's strongest emotion before any fight is resolution, and right then he was the most resolute man I have ever seen. We coaxed his tight resolute jaw open and forced an anti-depressant lozenge into his mouth. Those lozenges, as you know, are meant to be sucked and allowed to melt in the mouth. Benson's teeth shivered the thing into a million pieces and sent that awful bitterness down his throat and flying through his system. In less than a minute he was sober, the soberest man on Webster's world. It took us ten minutes to cover the bets. We bet everything, and I mean *everything*. None of us had ever seen Benson like this before. He would without a doubt whip the chocolate Kokai up into syrup.

Somebody lugged some force-field projectors into position. The girls started to giggle. I started to have second thoughts about Benson and the Kokai and the syrup. That thing had slapped my bunkmate so quickly—

Bradislav signalled to the Kokai and yelled: "GO!" to Benson. The big fight began.

Incredible, horrible, fascinating. That was the Kokai. Its reflexes were inhuman, which wasn't surprising in itself. Its speed was uncanny. We strained to follow its movements. To compare it with Benson's strong, fluid grace was grotesque. Benson couldn't compare, ever. The Kokai glided, shuffled with blinding speed on its big splay-feet. Think of a frog's tongue darting out to stick a fly in mid-air. Think of flicking snapping insects. That was the Kokai.

Its two hands flashed out, beat eight times on Benson's face, and withdrew. Benson blinked, shot out a left jab. The Kokai's hands caught the fist and stopped it cold, the Kokai's feet moved away before Benson could consider throwing another punch.

Benson moved after it, trying to corner it against the force-field. The Kokai moved constantly, staying away from Benson, slapping him five times a second, each slap sounding like a paddle on raw meat, the color of which was the exact duplicate of Benson's face after a minute or two.

That was the pattern. Benson couldn't corner it, couldn't catch it, couldn't hit it. He covered up and let himself be hit, waiting to see if the Kokai got tired. It didn't.

The yokels who'd wagered on the Kokai were yelping hoarsely and offering side-bets on the number of minutes Benson would last. But we'd already bet everything and couldn't cover a side-bet if

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we'd wanted to, and we definitely didn't want to.

Benson backed up until his back bounced gently off the force-field. The Kokai moved in, slapping Benson like a drummer from every angle. Benson bent over as if trying to get away from the Kokai. The thing moved in closer and Benson straightened and brought his fist from the ground and dug it into the Kokai's torso. Or would have, if the Kokai hadn't shuffled away like magic. Benson's fist still connected, but the Kokai was going away. The folds of skin around the head didn't flinch, the blazing yellow eyes didn't blink.

Benson's face was getting puffy. I wondered what would happen if and when his eyes swelled shut. I wondered how far the Kokai would go before it considered Benson whipped. I wondered if the Kokai ate their foes. I wondered how I'd pay off all those bets.

Benson started chasing the Kokai, swinging for all he was worth, forcing, crowding, like that mythical hero of classic Earth, Marciano. The Kokai easily evaded him, and now added something new. For the first time, the Kokai made a noise.

It was a shrill piercing burr, the sort of sound you make if you place your tongue loosely between your lips and blow out hard, only this was an extreme tenor. For such a superb fighting machine, the Kokai sounded like a fairy. Listen, it was weird, standing under the lights on the dock, watching that trilling alien give Benson the Death of a Thousand Cuts.

Benson was wearing down, his breath coming hard through his open mouth, his legs losing their tight steely spring and acting more like old rubber. The Kokai was still as fresh as when it started, slapping and shuffling and making that damn piercing burring noise. Benson's face was turning purple with the bruises. One of his eyes was almost completely shut. The Kokai wound up and slapped him a rocking roundhouse slap on the side of the head and sent him reeling across the ring. Benson bounced off the force-field as the Kokai came rocketing in to punish him some more.

A Kokai can make mistakes the same as humans can. It got too close and let Benson grab it around the waist. Benson wrapped his arms around the thing and hung on. The shrill burring of the Kokai rose two octaves and reached the painful stage of hearing. Its arms flailed at Benson faster than the eye could follow. Benson's eye was now closed altogether and the other was closing fast. He brought his knee up with all the strength he could manage into the Kokai's slender crotch. The Kokai screamed.

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Not out of pain, I think. It was the maddest scream I ever heard on a dock. And the damn thing jumped into the air—hell, it must have been five feet. If the force-field had had a ceiling the Kokai would have hit it. The force of the jump was so powerful it dragged Benson along with it. When they came down, Benson was on the bottom. We all heard his breath *wuff!* out, but he didn't let go of the Kokai. His hands locked behind the Kokai's back and were like welded steel as the Kokai struggled, straining, trying to break the grip.

They rolled from side to side, from one force-field to another, Benson squeezing as hard as he could, kneeing the Kokai repeatedly between the legs but having no discernable effect except increasing the intensity of that burring scream. The Kokai flailed at his head and face, making me wince at the sight of poor Benson. Both eyes were now closed, the lids black and swollen tight, the face dark and blotchy. But he still squeezed the Kokai, forcing that damn screaming up the ladder till I clapped my hands over my ears. Apparently Benson was hurting the thing.

I heard myself shouting: "Break it, Benson! Break it!" No one else heard me. They were yelling so loud it almost drowned out the Kokai.

Then the Kokai caught on. It kneed Benson in the crotch. That broke Benson's hold and they rolled away in different directions.

They made their feet a minute later and the Kokai, its wind back to normal, screeched after Benson, striking, slapping, minute after minute, until it literally *nagged* him, blinded, to the ground. We'd had enough, us bunkmates of Benson's, big bets or not, and we lowered the force-field and flung in the towel. When the Kokai failed to understand and kept on punishing Benson, we flung Bradislav in.

Next day Benson's eyes were open. He lay glumly on his bunk aboard the freighter, not looking at either Bradislav or me. Neither of us were feeling any better than Benson. We'd had to put some pretty outlandish promises on record with the purser to get him to advance us our salaries for the next six Galactic Standard months. We didn't want to see any of the Webster yokels and we damn sure didn't want to see another Kokai for a good long time. Then Ayama came busting in with a full-size tri-D of—guess what? A Kokai.

"Ayama," I told him, "I'll kill you if you don't get out of here with that."

"Yeah, well, listen," Ayama said testily, "the harbormaster had some dope on file concerning the Kokai. You know, the physical at-

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tributes, their home world, et cetera, and what little other information they'd part with to contribute to a more basic and lasting understanding of the two—"

"Oh, shut up," Bradislav said.

"Just listen. I won that little yes-man's tri-D betting against that tall dark kid Benson whipped, and I used it to get some shots of the Kokai last night. Here they are." He held out some small tri-D prints.

"How shall I kill you?" Bradislav mused. "Let me count the ways."

"Will you wait a minute? The prints I got here are in every way identical to this big print I got from the harbormaster. Notice?"

"So what?" I asked.

"Well," Ayama said, "you remember from school that all mammalian life thus far encountered in the Galaxy—and this includes the Kokai—share some basic characteristics, among them the most basic, that of two separate and distinct sexes."

"Wait a minute." That was Benson. He *rumbled.*

It took a while for it to sink in. I remembered that after the big fight one of the women had pulled away, she being a shade drunker than the rest, and made for the Kokai as if to cuddle up to it, and the Kokai had shoved her away in—it looked like—outrage.

I hung my head and said, "Oh, *no.*"

"You're absolutely right," Ayama said.

Benson didn't move. He didn't blink. His face hurt too much for that.

Bradislav laughed. "Well, Benson," he said, "at least you can still say that you've never met a man you couldn't—"

"Don't say it, Bradislav," Benson warned, "don't say it. I'll whip you if you say it, Bradislav."

Bradislav said it. Benson whipped him.

In the May issue of FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

The May issue of F&SF features Frank Herbert's new novelet, MURDER WILL IN, about a strange, symbiotic alien that depends for survival on its human host being a murderer. Theodore Sturgeon and Harlan Ellison are on hand with a collaboration titled RUNESMITH, plus stories by G. C. Edmondson, Eric Norden and others. The May issue is on sale March 31.

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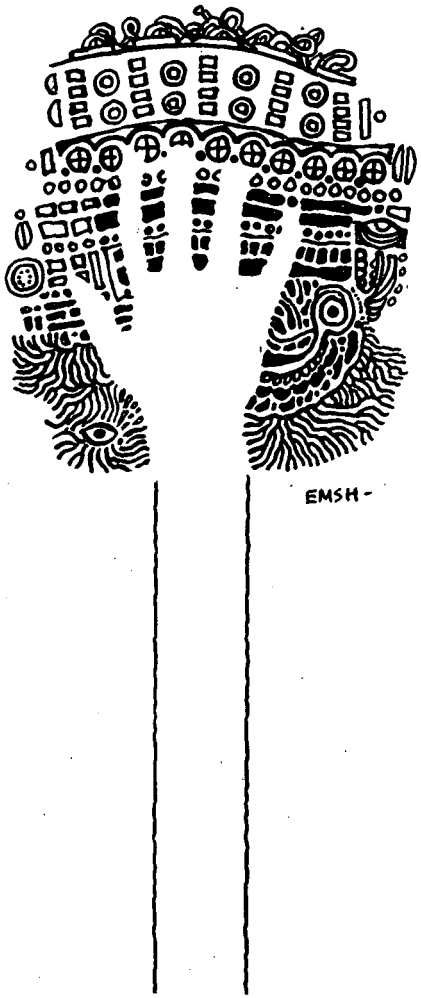

Greg Benford

THE SCARRED MAN

IN THOSE DAYS IT WAS MY custom to spend the last few evenings of my Antarctic holidays in the trader bars. I was in a small one, a comfortable fifteen meters beneath the snow, when I saw the man with the scar.

In such circumstances it was not at all unusual to see a scar, a tattoo or even a flesh wound. Ross City was a free port, the only large one in Antarctica. Privateers and smugglers filled the quays.

Ross was a straightlaced American explorer of a century or so before, and I am sure he would have been outraged at some of the things which went on in the city that bore his name. Submarines with silenced screws were plying a steady trade in smuggled oil between the outlaw offshore rigs of Australia and the hungry markets of North and South America. Ross City, tucked into a shelf jutting out from Mount Erebus, lies on a great circle between Australia and Chile.

Smugglers had money and were willing to trade some of it for a secure port to hole up in when the UN patrols were conducting their usually futile southern Pacific sweeps. Such men live with danger and a few close scrapes are hazards of the trade. A scar in itself was not out of the ordinary. It was the man's manner that attracted my attention.

He entered with a slight swagger and that slight toeing in of the

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feet that comes of walking down the narrow passages of a commercial submarine. He looked once around the room, slowly, as if expecting to find someone he knew. He nodded once at a mutual acquaintance of mine, Nigel Roberts, who was playing cards in a corner. Nigel does not like to be disturbed while playing. He feels that, with sufficient concentration, in time he will know enough to make his fortune this way. (Thus far, however, he seems to have lost a great deal of money and learned nothing.)

The man with the scar sniffed and continued to search the bar. He seemed to have an air of reserve about him that was most atypical of the sort of man who became a smuggler. His face bore an expression that implied he felt himself above the customers in the bar and was hesitant to spend his time in such low company.

Then he saw me. His face froze with shock.

His wiry frame tensed suddenly and he glared at me with an intense, burning rage.

He took three steps forward and balled his fists. I was about to become alarmed when, just as suddenly, he stopped. The scar, which ran from below his ear out to the very tip of his pointed chin, had flamed a stark red; now it subsided and faded back into the pallor of his skin.

We gazed at one another for a long moment. Then he flushed, lowering his eyes, and shook his head. He glanced up at me once more, as if to check and be sure I was not the man he had supposed, and then abruptly turned and marched out. As he left I noticed that his scar was deeper near the throat, as though made by the blade of a knife coming from below. It was not fresh and bore the dark look of a deep cut that could not be corrected by a skin graft and plastic tissue regeneration.

I breathed a sigh when he had gone. I found the experience unsettling for all its intriguing aspects, and I finished my drink with one long pull.

I had come into Ross City that evening for a break from the genteel monotony of the Mt. Erebus resort where I spent most of my holiday. The tourist value of Antarctica lies in its ski slopes and endless plains of blinding white snow. The sting of the incredible chill challenges some, so they ski there rather than on the tailored and well-known slopes in Eurasia or the Americas. Conditions there, I understand, are quite pedestrian. Like all sports, it has been made simple and safe for the ant armies who want everything packaged and free of the unexpected. Near the great population centers—and that phrase includes virtually all the planet now—there is little risk and thus little true sport.

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Unfortunately the adventurers are seldom exceptional conversationalists, and I found them boring. A week at the Erebus resort was more than enough to become saturated with tales of near-accidents, broken bindings at the critical wrong moment and slopes-I-have-known. So I took the tube down to the City, strolled through the red-light districts and ate in the ill-lit expatriate restaurants. It is perfectly safe even for a gentleman of my obvious affluence, for sportsmen and tourists are well treated. We bring in Free Dollars, which in turn create the economic margin that allows the City to remain a free port.

"Interesting one, eh?" Nigel said at my elbow.

The card game had broken up soon after the scarred man left, so Nigel came over to sit with me. I did not ask after his fortune. He didn't volunteer information, so he had lost again.

"Yes," I said. "For a moment he seemed to know me."

"I noticed. Come to think, you *do* look something like—"

"Who? The man who gave him that scar?"

"Well, it's a bit of a story, that scar and all."

"Fine. Let's have it. What are you drinking?"

When a snow frappé—laced with rum and cloves—had come for him, Nigel began.

"He's a restless sort, that one. Name is Sapiro. Been on the subs for quite a time now. The scar makes him hard to miss in a crowd and he's not the type to be overlooked anyway," Nigel said, his Australian accent inevitably gaining the upper hand, once he said more than two sentences at a go. "Always on the push, though I expect he's slowed down some now. Done everything at one time or another. Jobbed on an off-shore oil rig, worked the fishing fleets, had a habit of rushing things a bit and being a touch careless. He wanted to get places fast. Must've been born ambitious."

"He hasn't come very far, for all that."

"Ah, but you don't know. He started as a technical type, in business. Computers. Worked for International Computational Syndicate."

"That is the combine with IBM as principal holder, isn't it?"

"Right on. I'm sure you know what those outfits are like—regiments of stony-eyed executives, each one with a fractional share of a secretary, living in a company suburb and hob-nobbing with only company people. A closed life. Well, that's what Sapiro got himself into and for a while he didn't mind it. Fitted right in. All he wanted to do was get to the top and he didn't care where he lived or what he had to say at cocktail parties to get there."

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"But it didn't last."

"For a man like Sapiro ICS wasn't enough. Back in the 1990's, you know, that was when the white collar squeeze came on. Computers had caught up. Machines could do all the simple motor function jobs and then they started making simple executive decisions, like arranging routing schedules and production plans and handling most of the complaints—with automatic problem-solving circuits. That didn't leave any room for the ordinary pencil pusher, and they started to wind up in the unemployment lines.

"Well, Sapiro wasn't playing in that low-caliber a league, but he could feel the hot breath on his neck. He guessed the machines were always going to be getting better and the rest of his life would be a flatout race to stay ahead of their capabilities."

"He was right," I said, sipping at my mug.

"Sure he was. Three quarters of the population can tell you that right now from firsthand experience.

"But ambition is a funny thing. Sapiro wanted his share of the loot—"

"I gather that was rather a lot."

"A fortune, nothing less. Enough to keep him above the herd for life, without him ever lifting a finger. You see, he wasn't hot for power or status. It was money he wanted. Once he had the money he'd get some status anyway. Most people can't see beyond the next fellow's wallet. That's what you get in a mercantile economy, I guess. Funny."

"What did Sapiro do?" I said to hurry him along. Nigel had a tendency to lapse into philosophy in the middle of his stories.

"Well, he didn't want to fight the computers. So he looked for a way to use them. By this time he was a minor executive baby-sitting for the experimental machine language division, overseeing their research and reporting back to the company. He had a brother-in-law in the same lab, a mathematician. They were good friends—Sapiro was married to the researcher's sister—but they didn't see much of each other in an official capacity.

"One evening they had the brother-in-law over to dinner and were sitting around talking shop. Everybody likes to make fun of computers, you know, and they were telling jokes about them, figuring up schemes to make them break down and all that."

"Everyone is afraid of them," I said.

"Yes, I suppose that's it. Fear. They were tossing around ideas and having a good time when the brother-in-law—his name was Garner—thought up a new one. They kept kicking it around, getting a few laughs out of it, when they both suddenly realized that it

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would really work. There weren't any holes in it, as there were in most computer stories."

"This was a new vulnerability the designers had overlooked?" I said.

"Not exactly. The new machines ICS was putting together had a way they could be rigged and no one could tell that one little extra circuit had been built in. It never functioned in any other capacity, except the way Garner wanted it to.

"It worked like this. You start with your own computer, one of the new models. Give it a program to execute. But instead of doing the job immediately, the machine waits a while and then, in the middle of somebody else's calculation, takes five or ten seconds out to do your work. You know what a random number generator is?"

"Well . . . it's some sort of program, isn't it? It produces a number at random and there is no way to tell what the next one will be. The first one might be a 6, next a 47, then a 13. But there is no way to determine what the next one is."

"That's it. The time interval before your computer did your job would be random, so that the guy whose program came ten minutes after yours was supposedly done didn't *always* find 5 or 10 seconds missing. That made the trouble hard to trace, even if the other guy noticed he was losing a few seconds.

"But the kicker in all this is that Garner had found a way to charge those seconds to the account that was running at the time."

"Oh, I see. That gave him free running time at someone else's expense. Very clever."

"Yes, but not quite clever enough. After all, he and Sapiro had access to only one or two computers. If they stole lots of time from the other users—and what would they do with it, anyway?—it would be noticed."

"Could they not sell the computer time to some other company?"

"Of course. But they couldn't steal much. It wouldn't be profitable enough to run the risk."

"I imagine the risk would be considerable, as well."

"Quite. You know as well as I what the cartels are doing these days. It was even tougher then. ICS owned Sapiro and Garner. As long as they were employed there the company could arrange their 'disappearance' and few would be the wiser. They lived in a company town that looked the other way when company goons dispensed justice. No, the risk wasn't worth it. The scope would have to be a lot bigger—and the profits—before they could afford to make the gamble.

"Garner was the better tech-

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nician but Sapiro knew the way management's mind worked. Any fool knew computer time was worth money. The corporations would take pains to be sure no one could make away with sizable chunks of it, chunks large enough to perform a respectable calculation. So Sapiro figured he'd do just the reverse of what ICS expected."

"Oh? I—"

"Here's what he did. He had to have Garner's help, of course, in hiding the initial program inside a complicated subroutine, so even a careful search wouldn't find it. That was Garner's only contribution and a good thing, too, because he wasn't a man who could deal with people. He knew nothing of character, couldn't tell a thief from a duke. Or so Sapiro thought."

"Then Sapiro—" I said. The only way to get Nigel to hold on the subject was to threaten to interrupt, a theory which was quickly verified when he raised his voice a decibel and plunged on:

"The program he logged in instructed the computer to dial a seven digit telephone number at random. Now, most phones are operated by people. But quite a few belong to computers and are used to transfer information and programming instructions to other computers. Whenever a computer picks up the receiver—metaphorically, I mean—there's a special signal that says it's a computer, not a human. Another computer can recognize the signal, see.

"Sapiro's computer just kept dialing at random, hanging up on humans, until it got a fellow computer of the same type as itself. Then it would send a signal that said in effect, 'Do this job and charge it to the charge number you were using when I called.' And then it would transmit the same program Sapiro had programmed into *it*."

"So that—" I said.

"Right on. The second computer would turn around and start calling at random intervals, trying to find another machine. Eventually it would."

"I see, much like the windup toy game."

"The what?"

"When I was a boy we used to wonder about those windup dummies one could buy. Suppose you got a bunch and fixed them so they would just walk to the next dummy and wind him up with the little screw on the back. I remember once thinking that I could mobilize an entire windup toy army that way."

"Didn't work though, did it?"

"No." I smiled wryly. "I'm told the trouble lies in the energy. No dummy would have the power to wind up another to quite the same strength, so they would all run down pretty soon."

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"Yup, that's it. Only with Sapiro the money to pay for the few seconds of computer time was coming out of all the accounts available to the computer, completely randomly. He was using somebody else's energy."

"I still don't see—"

"As soon as the program was in the machine and working he and Garner quit. Those were tough days, and ICS didn't shed any tears to see them go. Their friends thought they were crazy for throwing up good jobs."

"How did they live?"

"Opened a computer consultant firm. Got no business, of course, but they were biding their time. All the while that one computer at ICS was dialing away, making a call about every twenty minutes. Pretty soon it had to find another soulmate, then there'd be *two* dialing.

"Garner calculated it would take five months for half the ICS computers in North America to be reached. But before that, programmers began to notice longer running times for standard jobs they'd set up, and people started to worry. The Sapiro program was buried deep and it was random, so everybody figured the trouble was a basic fault of the ICS computer. A random symptom is always evidence that the machine is failing, they said."

"Enter, Sapiro and Garner, Consultants," I said.

"You got it. They volunteered to find the trouble for free the first time. Garner was smart enough to hide what he was doing, and in an hour or so they straightened out the machine. Said they had a new method and couldn't reveal it. All they'd done was countermand the program that had been telephoned into the machine.

"That got them all the publicity they needed. They fixed a lot of ICS computers for incredible fees, only they did it through a cover agency so ICS wouldn't realize who they were.

"It worked fine, because even after they'd debugged a machine, sometime or other another computer that hadn't been fixed would call up and transmit the orders again. They never ran out of customers.

"Sapiro got rich and so did Garner, only Garner never seemed to show it. He didn't buy anything new or take his wife to Luna for a vacation. Sapiro figured it was just Garner's shyness. He didn't imagine his partner was saving it all up someplace where he could run when the time came. Sapiro didn't have much time to think about it anyway because he was working eighteen hour days, with assistants to do fake work as a blind. The flunkies would go in, fiddle with the machine the way Sapiro had told them, and then Sapiro would

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pop in, dump the program—he called it VIRUS—and take off. The people who owned the machine never suspected anything because it looked like a complicated process; all those assistants were there for hours.

"Sapiro and Garner just flew around the hemisphere, selling their cure-all—Sapiro called it VACCINE—and making money.

"Then one night the ICS goons came after him. They weren't out for fun, either. They tried a sonic rifle on his copter at short range and the only thing that saved Sapiro was an accident—his copter fell into a lake, where the ICS goons couldn't reach him to finish him off. He floated on a seat cushion and kept his head low while they searched from shore. It was late fall and the water was leaching the warmth out of him. He waited as long as he could but the ICS agents didn't leave the shore line—they were just making sure.

"He started paddling. It was hard to make any time without splashing and attracting attention but the movement kept him warm a little longer—just enough to get him to the other end of the lake. It wasn't a lake, actually, but a reservoir. Sapiro heard a rushing of water and thought it was the edge of the falls. He tried to swim away but by that time he was too weak. He went over.

"But it wasn't the falls. It was an overflow spot that fell about ten feet and then swirled away, taking him with it. The current carried him a half mile before he staggered up to the street, found a cab and used his credit cards to get to a hotel."

"He didn't go home?"

"No point. ICS had the house, his wife, everything. He checked by phone and found out several interesting things. That Garner hadn't come to work that day. That Garner's home numbers didn't answer. That his office was surrounded by ICS men.

"It took him three days to find Garner. He'd holed up somewhere, but Sapiro bought off a few people and tracked him.

"Garner had sold out to ICS, of course. The deal was that ICS wouldn't touch him after he handed over the information, but that didn't stick for Sapiro. When ICS saw what fools they'd been they went for blood and Sapiro was the nearest throat handy. They'd have killed Garner, too, if they'd known where he was.

"So after Sapiro took every Free Dollar Garner had—he was carrying it in solid cash, some jewelry and universal bank drafts, to be sure ICS didn't get it—he called ICS and told them where Garner was. He'd left Garner boarded in and tied up."

"Then it all resolved satisfactorily," I said. "He got his money and his freedom."

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"Freedom, yes. Money, no. Sapiro ran for Australia and beat it into the bush country. ICS never tracked him but they got some of the cash by good luck and Sapiro had to spend the rest of it to keep them off his tail. He had a year or two of good living but then it was gone. Even while he was spending it there was not much fun to it. ICS was still looking for him and by coincidence an agent ran into him in Sydney. Sapiro got the worst of the fight but he smashed the fellow's head when they both fell over a railing—he landed on top.

"That convinced him to lie low. It was about time he had to anyway because the money was almost gone. He got onto the offshore rigs and then into smuggling because it paid better. He's still doing it. He can't forget that he was once a big operator, though, and he looks down his nose a bit at the people he must associate with."

"Is that why he seemed a bit cold and reserved when he came in here?" I asked.

"Probably. He isn't a bad sort and he does tell a good joke. He would've come in and been sociable if he hadn't seen you."

"Why me?"

"He showed me some pictures from the ICS days once. One of them was of Garner. There's a fair resemblance between you two. Garner's hair was darker, but then it might have lightened with age."

"But ICS took care of him," I said.

"Maybe. Sapiro left him for ICS, but Garner might have gotten away or even talked his way out of it. Improbable, I'll grant, but it could have turned out that way.

"I don't think Sapiro is afraid of Garner at all, but you'll admit it must have been a shock for him to think he saw his old partner like that."

"Yes," I said, "I can well understand it. He gave me rather a start just by glaring at me."

"Good job he realized his mistake. Might have—"

"But look," I said. I was becoming impatient. "You said you would tell me about that scar. It's an awful thing, ought to have something done about it. How did Sapiro get it? When the copter crashed, or in the fight with the ICS man?"

"Ah yes, that. He's fond of the scar, you know. Wouldn't have it changed for anything, says it makes him look dashing.

"He got it on one of the offshore drillers when he was working as a hand. A boom came free and a twisted spike brushed against him as it went by. Sapiro always was a careless man."

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